



Bayou Triste



*A Story of
Louisiana*



Josephine Hamilton Nicholls





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BAYOU TRISTE

A STORY OF LOUISIANA

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BY

JOSEPHINE HAMILTON NICHOLLS

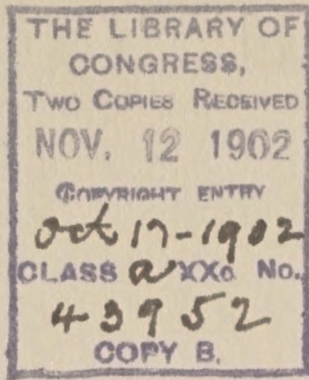


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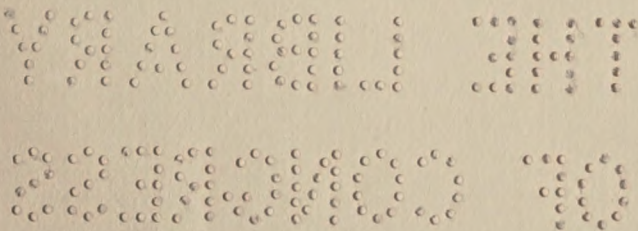




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PREFACE

FOR those of the South who are familiar with Louisiana plantation life this story may while away an hour; to those of the North who have not had the opportunity to know us it will give a brief insight into the happiest and most independent of lives.

To the "New Orleans Times-Democrat" and the "Detroit Free Press" acknowledgment is made for courteous permission to republish certain of the chapters appearing in this volume.

JOSEPHINE HAMILTON NICHOLLS.

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BAYOU TRISTE

A STORY OF LOUISIANA

I

THE FUNERAL

THE plantation bell jangled across the fields; awhile later a dozen wagons rattled down the road to the bayou; musical, deep-pitched voices shouted good-humoredly to restive mules; then the big gate banged, startling me into resentful wakefulness.

The sun was rising, and the strange peace of the early morning brooded over pasture and garden.

I crept out of bed, threw a cape over my shoulders, and cautiously opened the window. Yard and field and distant swamp were enveloped in a pale fold of purple mist. The grass sparkled with dewdrops and the glossy

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leaves of the crêpe myrtle trees glistened faintly.

The encircling live-oaks rioted with music, the chirp of wrens, the pert twitter of sparrows, the exquisite melody of mocking-birds. From my old-fashioned garden floated the mingled fragrance of sweet olive, honeysuckle, and early roses.

The far-away murmur of bells and the harsher echo of a butcher's horn announced that the tiny village down the bayou was waking to a new day, and the call of cocks and anxious cackle of hens betrayed the poultry-yard's impatience to be up and doing.

Once a dog barked, and my fox terrier courteously responded; then from some distant pasture a cow lowed, and a calf made mournful answer.

The world was at its best, pure and still and tranquil, unmarred by the frictions and evil passions of the workaday hours. I found myself resolving, as I had often resolved before, to make

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a practice of early rising, and wondering, as I had frequently wondered pityingly, how people who woke to the noise and fret of a city endured their lives.

After drinking in the beauty and peace until prudence warned me to desist, I stole back to bed, feeling in some way strengthened by my silent communion with Nature.

A step sounded beneath my window, a shuffling, deliberate step that I recognized as Uncle Ephr'um's. He was on his way to the milking-shed, for his buckets rattled as he moved. Evidently he was not in the best of humors; his grumbling voice drifted in to me:

“Allus levin dat gate open! Kawnt tun my back widouten I fine de cows done got wid de calves. Huccum you ac so? Youse farly honin fur a lickin', you is. Jes you wait twelst I git you home an' Ise gwineter lik you widin an eench of yo' life.”

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“’Tain’ my fault,” sniffed Joe in return, “hits dat outdacious leetle red mar’ of Miss Mary’s; she kin lif dat hook ez good ez a pusson kin. I ain’ bin nyar dat gate sence larst night.”

“Boy!” Uncle Ephr’um responded, “quit yo’ lyin’, what ain’ cevin noboddy, an’ fotch dat stove wood ’fore I brains yo’ black hade.”

Silence fell, broken shortly, however, by Flip’s frantic greeting of the butcher’s cart, then doors began to open and shutters to swing back.

Priscilla had arrived from her cabin in the pasture, and the day’s life had begun.

A bar of sunshine slanted into my room, resting lovingly on the portrait over my mantel. It touched the girl’s white throat and played among the curls on her forehead; it sparkled on the crystal candelabra and lingered a moment on the pile of old “Littells” under my table.

Steps echoed down the hall, there

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was a quick knock, and the door opened to admit Priscilla with my early coffee. I knew at once that something of a pleasant nature had occurred ; her face wore that expression of solemn enjoyment characteristic of the negro when under the influence of emotion.

“What has happened ?” I inquired.

“Zeke Coleman’s wife done dade,” she said.

“Not Betsey ?”

“Yessum.”

“That strong, healthy creature ? It doesn’t seem possible.”

“Yessum ; dey say she tuk cole at Mattie Powler’s weddin’. Ole Aunt Lucy ’tended her, but ’t warnt no use ; she wuz marked from de fus.”

“Nonsense, you ought to have had a doctor.”

“’T warnt no use, Miss Mary. We done de bes’ we knowed how, — me an’ Aunt Lucy an’ Modeste Powler. We sot up all las’ night wid her, aprayin’ an’ ’zortin’ an’ singin’ hymns, but she jes

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

lay dar, gittin' weaker an' weaker 'fore our eyes."

"I dare say," I cried. "Whoever heard of such cruelty? You know too that Doctor Starr will come at any hour."

"Miss Mary, doctors is fur white folks; Aunt Lucy Allen onderstans a nigger's innerds bettern enny doctor roun' hyar, an' she done de bes she knowed, but Betsey Coleman wuz marked from de fus."

I returned my cup in silence, the hopelessness of argument being borne in upon me.

"Zeke's gwine ter give her a fus'-class funeral," pursued Priscilla; "a twenty-dollar coffin an' a white cashmere shroud; deys gwine ter git de hearse from town, an' I hearn tell dey wuz 'terminated ter ax Mr. Fred fur de barouche."

"Where will they bury her?"

"On de plantation."

"Oh, yes," I said, for I had forgotten

¶ THE FUNERAL ¶

that, as one of our old slaves, Betsey had the privilege of burial in the cleared space beyond our graveyard.

“Deys gwine ter hev two preachers, Brother Hicks from town an’ ole Uncle Boston from de Harrell Place.”

“Much it will help Betsey,” said I. “If Zeke had been a kinder husband, and you people had had the sense to send for a doctor, there would n’t have been any need for all this foolishness.”

“Foolishness, Miss Mary? You sholy ain’ meanin’ dat?”

“Yes, I do too. Poor Betsey, she was the best creature living.”

“You ain’ got enny ole black skirt ter giv me, hez you, Miss Mary?” asked Priscilla, following her own train of thought.

“Why?” demanded I. “You are not one of the family.”

“No ’m, but dey axed me ter see ter things ginerelly ; ’sides, Ise president of De United Band of Good Samaritans, an’ wese gwine ter tun out.”

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

“ You can have my blazer suit,” I replied reluctantly, for her excited mood fretted me. “ Now do go on, for at this rate we ’ll never have breakfast.”

A moment later I heard voices in the yard and my brother’s window opened.

“ Who ’s there ? ” he asked.

“ Me, Marse Fred ; Zeke Coleman.”

“ Well, what do you want ? ”

“ A order fur forty dollars,” in tones of unction.

“ Forty dollars ? nearly all you have left of your grinding wages ; what on earth do you want with it ? ”

“ My wife ’s done dade ; yessir, died las’ night ; an’ seein’ ez she wuz ole Jim Robinson’s darter, an’ deys a famly what’s sot on fine funerals, I ’lowed ez dey should n’ hev no chance ter sputify de sen’ off what I gives Betsey.”

“ Now, Zeke,” said the boyish voice, “ all this fuss and feathers won’t do Betsey any good, and you’ve got a houseful of little children to think

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about ; so you just give her an everyday sort of funeral, and if people make remarks you can send them to me."

Further conversation followed, but Fred was firm in his refusal to advance the money, and when Priscilla came in later I recognized that she was in anything but a pleasant frame of mind.

"Deys jes' gwine ter hev a cotton shroud an' a six-dollar coffin!" she said contemptuously. "Lor' ! ef we'd knowed dat dis mornin' de Good Samaritans would n't hev tunned out at all."

"Priscilla !" said I frigidly, "you're a perfect snob, and I'm ashamed of you."

That afternoon, as Fred and I were riding across the fields, we met Betsey's funeral procession toiling down the "big road" to the graveyard.

The barouche, containing the sorrowing relatives (whose grief was somewhat mitigated by their sense of importance), followed the hearse ; be-

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

hind came the plantation negroes ; and last, but by no means least, the United Band of Good Samaritans, with Priscilla at their head — Priscilla looking so stylish in my blazer suit that I straightway repented my generosity.

The entire procession was singing (or chanting rather) a weird strain that haunted me for days. The chorus I have never forgotten :

“Frum dis worl’ of sin ter de skies above,
Frum dis worl’ of pain ter de good Lord’s
love !”

Over the bare fields floated the musical sounds, broken now and then by an hysterical “Glory ! Glory !” from Priscilla, while in the dingy old vehicle ahead lay Betsey, unconscious of and indifferent to the ceremonies in her honor.

“Mary,” said Fred the next morning at breakfast, “Zeke Coleman has ‘vamoosed the ranch’ ; or, in language more intelligible to you, has deserted his children.”

THE FUNERAL

I stared at him in amazement.

“He collected what was owing to him last night, ostensibly to buy supplies and to settle an old debt; instead of which he went to Ramon, took the late train to New Orleans, and has disappeared, nobody knows whither.”

“What a shame!” I cried, “now who will take care of those poor little creatures?”

“Oh, as to that,” he said, “Modeste and Dicey have already taken them in charge, and of course I shall see that they are fed.”

He sauntered out of the room just as Priscilla came in to wash the silver.

I immediately grew eloquent over Zeke’s misconduct, but she treated the subject with the delightful philosophy that is so frequently displayed over other people’s misfortunes.

“Now don’ you be frettin’ over dem chillun,” she said; “dey ain’ gwine ter starve dese days.”

“Will you help with them?” I asked.

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

“You seemed so intimate with the family.”

“I’d like ter,” she replied; “I’d sholy like ter, but Ise got duties ter my own chillun which don’ allow of no mixin’ up wid oder folkses.”

“The Good Samaritans, then, — perhaps they will do something?”

Priscilla looked at me compassionately.

“Miss Mary,” said she, in the tone one employs to an ignorant but well-loved child. “You don’ onderstan’; de Good Samaritans don’ do nothin’ fur you whilest youse livin’, deys ’sociated fur de spress purpose of honorin’ you arfter youse dade.”

II

THE MATCH-MAKER

PRISCILLA was rubbing the brasses and I was sitting on the back gallery watching her. Priscilla, I regret to say, did not live her life according to biblical instruction, "not with eye service, as men pleasers," for I noted that the most of her good work was accomplished under the spell of my inspiring presence.

As she rubbed and polished she interpolated remarks, some of a purely indifferent character, others full of mysterious and doubtless weighty meaning.

I read calmly on, now glancing at the fenders, now letting my gaze wander over the yard where Flip was quarrelling with an old shoe. His perfectly superfluous activity fretted me, and instantly recalled a remark of Fred's to the effect "that the sight of other

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people's energy always nerved him to —idleness."

In an unwary moment I looked at Priscilla, caught her eye, and straightway fell a victim to her confidences.

"Yessum," she said, pausing to straighten the head handkerchief poised rakishly over her left eye; "I ain' sayin' nothin' against Modeste Powler, but youse bleegee ter 'low, Miss Mary, dat dem gals of hern ain' half so good-lookin' ez my Sally or Dicey Jones' Lucy."

I acquiesced, for there was no denying the truth of her statement.

"Well, I reckon we ain' de onliest ones what thinks so; but Modeste Powler hez done married dem gals ter de two bes' matches on de place. Jeems Hewett, Mattie's husband, 's a settled man wid money in de bank, an' Frank Barnes, what married Cynthy, gits a dollar 'n a quarter a day, an' Mr. Fred 'lows him ter keep a cow an' horse in de plantation parstures."

"Because Frank stuck to him through

❧ THE MATCH-MAKER ❧

the 'strike'," I said impressively. Priscilla ignored my comment.

"I wants ter know what Modeste Powler duz?" she went on; "hit's jes like 'kunjerin',' Miss Mary, hit sholy is."

"They were very nice girls," I ventured.

Priscilla sniffed.

"'T warnt dat, Miss Mary, dey didn' hev nothin' ter do wid hit. Modeste done hit herself; she's already kóatched two good matches on de place, an' now she's sot her eye on Davy Masters fur Jinny!"

"Davy?" I exclaimed, scarcely wondering at Priscilla's indignation, for he was the most eligible bachelor on the plantation.

"Yessum; an' Jinny's a little no-count nigger gal, what ain' fitten fur nothin'. I reckon," with withering sarcasm, "he ain' waited all dis time fur her!"

"It often happens like that," I re-

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

marked unconsolingly. "By the way," looking in the direction of the yard-gate, "yonder comes Modeste now."

Priscilla gathered up her brasses, "Ise gwine ter put dese back," she said, and disappeared just as Modeste came lumbering up the steps.

She was a tall, ungainly woman, as black as the ace of spades, slow of speech and usually accounted slow of intellect, with a cheerful smile and a confiding manner that was exceedingly gratifying to your self-esteem. She gave you the impression of standing mentally in awe of you, and by her attitude disposed you favorably towards her at once.

As she sat down on the step and began mopping her face with her blue-checked apron, Priscilla's suspicions of "kunjerin'" seemed singularly inappropriate.

"How's your garden, Modeste?" I asked, by way of opening the conversation.



*Priscilla gathered up her
brasses*

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“Right smart, thank you, Miss Mary. I fotched you a mess of green peas,” removing the cover from a small tin bucket; “an’ nex’ week I ’lows to fetch you some butter beans.”

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Priscilla,” as that worthy appeared, “take these peas to the pantry and fill Modeste’s bucket with sugar. The key is on the post.”

Priscilla swept up, and the “Evenin’, Sister Powler,” and the “Evenin’, Sister Wilson,” that followed reminded me forcibly of the greeting between two pugilists.

When Priscilla had gone I remarked tentatively, “I hear Jinny is going to be married.”

Modeste’s indifferent manner would have done credit to any society dame. “Yessum,” she said, without any expression of satisfaction even momentarily lighting up her features.

“Is it true that Davy is to be the bridegroom?”

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“Yessum,” with even less animation.

The monosyllabic reply tried my patience.

I longed to hear more of the affair, to see some sign of gratification from Modeste, to know she felt elated even though she did not show it; but dignity forbade further questioning. Perhaps she felt this, for she turned slowly around.

“Davy said he warn’t never gwine ter marry,” she observed.

“He reckoned without you,” I replied.

“I never sets eye on a man fur nothin’,” she said. “Dar wuz Jeems Hewett — a widower — set against marryin’ agin. I choosed him fur Mattie de fus’ day he sot foot on de plantation. Den dar wuz Frank Barnes, he wuz hangin’ roun’ Priscilla’s Sally right smart like; when I heerd tell ’bout his horse an’ cow I ’spicioned he’d do fur Cynthy. Den dar wuz Davy Mas-

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ters — ” She paused, but her smile said all the rest.

I gazed at her in speechless admiration. Priscilla said “she had sot her eye on Davy,” and it seemed she was not far wrong.

Through the kitchen window floated Priscilla’s voice :

“When de hyart is sad ’t is a jye ter know
Dere ’s a better worl’ dan dis worl’ below.”

I smiled involuntarily and Modeste listened with a pensive air ; evidently she had no qualms of conscience.

“Do you mean,” I said, “that you actually decide a long time ahead who you want your girls to marry ?”

“Yessum, an’ hit’s de right thing ; dere ain’ no mistakes den.”

In some mysterious way she had caught the spirit of the old French régime, and was in thorough sympathy with the *mariage de convenance*.

Priscilla’s tones rang out with increased earnestness : —

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“Dough de sinners thrive in dis worl’ of sin,
Sain’ Peter ain’ gwine fur ter let ’em in !”

“Well, but it’s one thing to pick out a man,” I observed, “and another to have him do what you want.”

“Lor’ ! Miss Mary, I warn’t born yistedday, an’ arfter I makes up my mine ’bout him, I axes him ’roun’ Sunday nights. I reckon you ain’ forgot how I kin cook ?”

“I certainly have n’t,” I replied, recalling childish trips to her cabin, and the coffee and biscuits that had gladdened my youthful appetite.

“Well, I ’members all I useter know, an’ spare-ribs an’ chine an’ pig’s-feet ain’ gwine abeggin’ arfter I gits thru handlin’ ’em.”

“Modeste,” said I, in low, awe-struck tones, “is that what you do with your pigs ?”

“Yessum, an’ some folks say hit’s a norful wase, but I dunno.”

“An excellent investment !” said I, and my mind went back to the chafing-

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dish parties and *petits-soupers* that some of my acquaintances indulged in. Their methods, I could not but admit, were strikingly similar.

“Do you invite any girls?” I demanded.

Modeste looked at me reproachfully.

“What I gwine ax enny gals fur, Miss Mary? No'm; I suttently never killed my pigs fur a passel of no-count nigger gals. Womens is curious things, ennyhow, deys ongrateful all thru. You duz fur a man an' you knows whar you is, but you duz fur a woman an' whar is you?”

I nodded appreciatively. Modeste's analysis though crude was effective.

“Chine and pig's-feet and spare-ribs,” I repeated thoughtfully, for I wished to retail the *mênu* to Fred later. “Was that all, Modeste?”

“Yessum, ceppen todes de las', when things wuz kinder settlin' down, Tom fotched out he whiskey bottle.”

I looked at Modeste, gaunt and

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black and awkward, and did homage to her talents. How could Priscilla and Dicey Jones cope with such an intellect? I had it in my heart to pity them, the contest was such an unequal one.

“Well, Miss Mary,” said Modeste, rising, “Ise bleege ter be gwine. I jes’ drapped in ter say ‘Howdy.’”

“Modeste,” said I, longing in my humble way to show recognition of her successful campaign, “tell Jinny she can have my old white silk for her wedding-dress if she will come for it.”

“Thank you, Miss Mary. I tole Jinny you would n’ furgit her.”

“By the way,” said I, “don’t neglect to stop at the kitchen for your bucket.”

A few minutes later I saw her moving slowly down the “big road” to the quarters.

Priscilla’s song had ceased; evidently the thought of joys in another world did not wholly compensate her

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for the trials and disappointments of this one.

Her youngest son, a Benjamin of four, having come within injudicious range of her wrath, was requested to quit the kitchen at once unless he wanted her to "brain him with a coal," and the pans and pots flew about in a way that was anything but orthodox.

Fred, coming whistling up the steps, called to me to know what had ruffled the serene spirit of our handmaid.

"Modeste has been here," I explained. "Jinny is going to marry Davy Masters, and Priscilla feels it keenly."

"Davy going to be married?" exclaimed my brother. "Good for little Jinny."

"Jinny!" said I scornfully; "much she had to do with it."

"What is troubling you, Mary?" cried Fred. "You look pensive."

"I am mentally prostrate."

"Before whom?"

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Modeste Powler.”

“Modeste! Do you think she had anything to do with that match? Why, she’s as dull as ditch-water.”

“Dull,” I echoed scornfully; “my good sir, you don’t know the meaning of the word.”

III

THE COURTSHIP

I WAS conversing with Priscilla on the subject of cobwebs, — a conversation not altogether of a pleasant character, for she had just informed me that she “was too busy keepin’ her soul clean ter keep de house clean,” and I was about to make a fitting response, — when Charlotte Deals, old Peter Deals’ daughter, appeared in the door.

Charlotte was a weazened little creature with a pathetic expression that always appealed to me, so when I saw her hesitating in the door I straightway forgot my grievances and called to her to come in.

She wore a blue calico skirt, a pink silk waist that had once been mine, and a man’s overcoat.

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Her shoes were laced with white strings, and her hair wrapped in innumerable twists over her head. Altogether she was not picturesque-looking, and, as much as I liked her, I was fain to confess that her appearance left much to be desired.

But I was always glad to see her, for in the gay, lighted-hearted past she had been the only "quarters" child I was allowed to play with, and the memory of glorious blackberry parties and crayfishing expeditions successfully engineered by her was with me still.

Priscilla did not approve of Charlotte; she said she was "common," that old Peter was "de no-countedest nigger on de place, an' her ma' —"

"Not a word against Ellen," I would always break in. "She was with grandmother when she died, and mother told me that no friend could have been kinder."

So Charlotte continued to call on

❧ THE COURTSHIP ❧

me, sometimes to bring me a water-melon or a bucket of berries, sometimes merely to say "Howdy," and now and then to unburden her heart of its woes.

For hers was not a path of roses. The negro women on the plantation were as ready to laugh at failure as their more cultivated superiors are, and Charlotte, clumsy, slow, and timid, was a legitimate target for their ridicule.

To-day I guessed she had come to me for sympathy, so dismissing Priscilla — who departed sniffing — I invited Charlotte onto the front gallery, where she might talk at her ease.

"What's the matter now?" I asked, sitting down on the steps and leaning my head against a pillar; "has any one been worrying you?"

Charlotte hesitated:

"Deys all mad aginst me," she said; "dey sho is rarin', but dis time hit don' mek no diffrence."

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“It does n’t?” said I approvingly. “Well, I’m glad to hear it; you know how often I’ve told you it was silly to mind them. What’s the trouble?”

My glance had strayed away, but as Charlotte made no immediate reply I turned in some surprise to look at her.

“Charlotte,” cried I, “what has happened?” For her black face fairly beamed and her dull eyes shone with a great happiness.

“Miss Mary,” she said in a shaking voice, “Ise ingaged ter be married.”

Now, I had always known that to betray surprise over an announcement of this kind, no matter how amazing it might be, was exceedingly bad form, and among my friends I had hitherto managed to remember this rule; but when Charlotte’s news fell upon my incredulous ears I regret to say that my good-breeding suddenly failed me.

“Engaged?” I repeated, staring. “To whom?” (“Some perfect terror,” I thought disgustedly.)

THE COURTSHIP

“Ter Lincoln Wilson,” she answered.

“Lincoln,” I cried; “not Priscilla’s Lincoln?”

“Yessum.”

“Oh, sweet revenge!” I murmured, “‘The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.’”

“Ma’am?” said Charlotte.

“Nothing,” I replied; “tell me how it happened.” For that Lincoln, Priscilla’s pride and boast, — Lincoln, who taught school on the Harrell place, and who was studying to be a “preacher,” — should contemplate marrying old Peter Deals’ Charlotte, seemed well-nigh incredible.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“Hit happened like dis,” said Charlotte. “Ma’s sister Dinah, — you members Dinah, Miss Mary?”

I nodded. Was I likely to forget her! She of the oily tongue and elastic conscience, whose short-lived reign over my laundry had driven me almost to despair.

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

“ Well, ma’s sister Dinah, what lives on de Harrell place, tuk seeck, an’ sont over ter ma ter sen one of we-all gals ter nuss her.”

“ And the others would n’t go and you did ? ” I broke in.

“ Why, yessum,” cried Charlotte. “ Now, how did you know ? ”

“ I just guessed it, go on — this is a story with a moral.”

Charlotte very wisely paid no attention to me but pursued her narrative :

“ Well, I went, an’ Lor’ knows I seed sights wid her. She’s a church member, but hit don’ seem ter mek no diffrence, an’ her langwidge sho wuz contraptious.

“ One night she tuk hit in her hade she’d like ter see a preacher, ’n when I lowed dere wuznt none I cud git, she sez Lincoln Wilson, what taught school in de cabin back of de sugar-house, wuz larnin’ ter be one, an’ he’d do bettern nothin’, so I went overn got him ” — she paused and drew a

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long breath. "Hez you ever seed him, Miss Mary?"

"Not for a long time."

"He wears sto' close an' a shinin' collar, an' a tie wid a dimon' pin, an' he talks book talk what I kawnt mek no sense out of."

"Ah! he must be up to date," said I; "to be incomprehensible is to be clever nowadays."

"Ma'am?" said Charlotte.

"Nothing; go on."

"Well, he cum like I axed him, an' he read reel cumfortin' like outn de Bible, 'bout the prodigy son an' de century man what sez ter one man 'cum' an' he cumd, an' ter anoder pusson 'go' an' he goed, an' den Aunt Dinah gun ter snore in de middle of de chapter, an' Lincoln he close de book an' axed me ter set by de fire an' tell him 'bout you-alls and de folks at us house an' he ma an' de chillun."

"Which of course you did?"

"Yessum; an' de nex' night he cum

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

agin', an' den every night fur three weeks. I 'lowed ez he wuz reel good ter Aunt Dinah, but she say now dat she 'spicioned frum de fus dat he hed he eye on me."

"Did you think so too, Charlotte?"

"Oh, go long, Miss Mary," she said. "What he gwine look at me fur? I ain' no fancy nigger; I kawnt do nothin' but clean house an' cook an' wash."

"That 's a good deal," I said admiringly; "good looks, you know, are only skin-deep."

"Dey goes a long way," she answered, with the wistfulness of one who had never known beauty; "howsoever, hit's all de same now."

"Did you talk much, Charlotte?" I asked, thirsting to know the methods which had procured her the "catch" of the Harrells' quarters.

"No'm, I ain' sayin' nothin'. I jes' sot an' listent whilest he argified."

"You let him see how smart you thought he was."

❧ THE COURTSHIP ❧

“Oh, yessum.”

My gaze rested thoughtfully on Charlotte; had I not, after all, underrated her?

“Kate was right,” I observed; “she said a pot of incense was more effective than anything else, and I believe she knew.”

“Ma’am?” said Charlotte.

“What did he say when he asked you to marry him?”

“Hit wuz kinder suddint, Miss Mary. I wuz cookin’ a possum what Mr. Rafe Harrell shot in he hin-house an’ sont ter Aunt Dinah. I wuz bakin’ hit wid sweet ’taters, an’ hit sho did smell good. Lincoln he sez ter me, sez he, ‘Charlotte, you ain’ nothin’ on looks, an’ I ’lows folks ’ll spect me ter do better, but you sho duz know how ter cook. Charlotte,’ sez he, an’ he cum over ter de hyarth whar I wuz standin’, ‘Ise bin onsettled in my mine ’bout you fur a long time, but Ise ’cided now; will you hev me?’”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“And did you say ‘yes’ at once?” I asked, hoping to hear of some exhibition of spirit.

“Yessum,” said Charlotte. “I sho wuz glad ter git him, an’ ef a gal wants ter marry a feller huccome she play like she don’ wan’ him?”

“I don’t know why,” I said musingly. “When do you expect to be married?”

“Nex’ week ; I ’lowed ez hit wuz bes’ ter hev hit right off ’fore he kin change he mine.”

“O Charlotte,” I exclaimed, “you ought n’t to be so suspicious.”

“Miss Mary,” replied Charlotte, “ef I wuz good-lookin’, like you, I reckon I would n’ be afeered ; but, bein’ ez hit is, Ise gwine ter run things thru — ”

“Have you told Priscilla yet?”

“No ’m,” and into her eyes came an expression that boded ill for Priscilla ; “but Ise gwine ter, an’ dere ain’ no use of her rarin’, kase I tends to marry Lincoln, no matter what he ma sez.”

❧ THE COURTSHIP ❧

I arose and invited Charlotte indoors, and when she departed a few minutes later she carried a bundle of my cast-off finery.

On her way out she stopped at the kitchen to break the tidings to her future mother-in-law.

I meanwhile had fled to the garden, knowing that Priscilla would soon seek me to rave against Charlotte, and I disappeared, hoping thereby to escape her.

Vain thought!

I was stretched on a bench, staring through the branches at the soft sky overhead, when the garden-gate clicked, and down the path, her head-handkerchief tilted to one side, her eyes flaming, came the bridegroom's mother.

"Priscilla," I cried, collecting all my moral strength to grapple with her. "I won't hear a word against Charlotte!"

"Miss Mary," said Priscilla, in a voice of concentrated bitterness, "dat gal's done hoodooed my boy. He

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

never'd looked at her widout hit. She's done kunjered him."

"Nonsense, all mothers think that. To tell you the truth, I think Charlotte is more to be pitied than your son. From what I hear he must be a very vain fellow, and that kind does n't usually make good husbands."

"Miss Mary!" wailed Priscilla.

"Yes, I mean it; now do go away, you make my head ache."

So Priscilla departed, vowing vengeance and swearing to break off the match, but she reckoned without her host. Charlotte, having tasted the sweets of victory, fought nobly for her rights, and in the end won the day.

She was married in the big warehouse on the bayou, and, as Fred and I both approved of the bride, we made it a very grand affair indeed.

Priscilla was not present, Lincoln's *mésalliance* proving too severe a blow to her pride.

For some time after the marriage

❧ THE COURTSHIP ❧

she held coldly aloof, but last week Fred gave Charlotte an opossum he had killed in the stable, and Priscilla told me next day she had been invited to partake of it.

“An’ dat gal sho’ do know how ter cook,” she observed.

I repeated the conversation later to Fred.

“Praise from Sir Hubert,” he commented.

“They will be reconciled,” said I. “Priscilla is of the earth earthy, and Charlotte knows it.”

“Charlotte,” he remarked, “is not clever, and yet —”

“Real cleverness,” I said, “is comprehension of the situation.”

“Or the individual,” suggested he.

“Yes.”

“From a woman’s point of view, Mary.”

“And that,” said I, “is sure to be the right one.”

IV

THE CHAPERON

WHEN I opened the window and a delicious rush of fragrance swept in, I said aloud and with a little sigh of rapture :

“ Ah, if only Kate were here ! ”

“ Kate ! ” cried Fred, who was seated on the back gallery doctoring Flip’s paw, “ why, you could n’t pay her to leave town.”

“ I don’t see why, now that Lent has come.”

“ As if that counts ! ”

“ But it does ; you never do Kate justice, Fred. She may be fond of society and all that kind of thing, but I hardly wonder, considering how popular she is.”

“ Nor I ; therefore don’t try to transport her to these wilds.”

“ But she loves the country.”

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“Her idea of the country is a perpetual house-party. If I thought she would enjoy our life here, I would have a very different opinion of her.”

Kate was our cousin and an especial favorite of mine, so that Fred's comments were by no means well received.

“She's charming,” he went on, “and if I were worth a million or if the plantation were out of debt, I might let myself see her through your eyes; but as it is —” he drew a long breath and gave Flip's paw a thoughtful pat.

I stood at the window staring, the possibility of Fred's caring for Kate never having entered my head. I was about to voice my surprise when Joe, our small factotum, sauntered round the corner of the house.

Fred immediately accosted him.

“Have you curried Gypsey, Joe?”

“No, sir, I was jes' fixin' ter do hit.”

“Ah, indeed! and fed the cows?”

“Not yit, Mass Fred. I wuz bleeged ter go ter town fur Aunt Sylla, 'an de

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

tellygraf man hailed me ez I was passin' an' guv me dis fur you."

"Dis" was a telegram, but Fred opened it leisurely and I looked on without alarm, for we were alone in the world and the yellow envelope was not likely to contain ill news.

"It's from Kate," cried Fred, "to you, Mary; I didn't notice when I opened it."

"Will be out on noon train; bored to death in town."

"Isn't that like her?" I cried. "I wrote and asked her last week; now sir," triumphantly, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"It's a caprice," he replied; "she'll be flying home again in no time. Well, I must be getting into the fields. Don't wait breakfast for me."

"Yes I shall, so don't you dare to be late; I'm hungry now. Priscilla," at the top of my voice. "O Priscilla," as she appeared in the door; "catch the little red rooster and one of those

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white pullets. Miss Kate Faulkner is coming out from town to-day."

"You don' sesso!" she cried cordially, for fortunately inhospitality is not one of my follower's too numerous failings. "You Joe, Jim, Benjie! Whar on airth is them boys?"

"In the stable, of course; I see Joe now. You Joe, come here this minute. Priscilla wants you to catch the chickens for dinner."

"Kin we take Flip, Miss Mary?"

"Certainly not, he has hurt his paw."

I went indoors and presently wild cackling followed by a series of agonized squawks announced the triumphant conclusion of the hunt.

My mind was therefore at rest on one point, and by the time Fred returned I had arranged such a creditable *mênu* that even Priscilla, who did not believe in prophesying smooth things, was gracious enough to say that I might in time "larn how ter keep house."

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When the noon train pulled into the station Fred was waiting on the platform, while I remained in the carriage to hold the reins. It seemed to me he had been gone an interminable time, and I had just resigned myself to believing that Kate had failed us, when down the steps, looking the picture of graceful, beautiful youth, came our cousin.

I had always thought her the prettiest creature in the world, and I thought so more than ever when I saw the flush on her cheek, the light in her eyes as she rushed to meet me.

"You dear old thing," she cried, springing in beside me; "I can't hug you, because those stupid people are too near, but just wait until we reach home!"

Home! I glanced at Fred, and though he seemed absorbed in the disposition of Kate's traps I felt sure he had heard.

"So you were bored to death," I

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said, looking searchingly into her eyes. "What change has come over the spirit of your dream?"

"People, my dear girl. Town was all right, but I've seen too much of my kind lately. Why, what has become of the old Rainot house? It used to stand there."

"You remember it?" asked Fred in surprise.

"Remember it? Why, of course. Dear me," as we crossed the ramp by the saw-mill, "how high the bayou is."

"Awfully so!" said Fred. "Who knows, we may be able to show you a crevasse before you go back. Nothing like new sensations, they say."

Kate looked at him pensively. "Does he often get like that?" she asked.

Fred laughed in spite of himself, and when a few minutes later we turned in at our own gates he said with his accustomed cheerfulness, "Here

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

we are, Kate. Remember! who enters Southmeade leaves society behind."

"Thank Heaven!" she replied, and in her voice there was a ring of genuine relief.

"I know you will be sorry," I said to her an hour or so later, "but Fred is obliged to go to Ramon to-night, so you and I will be left lamenting."

Kate was seated at the window and for a moment she made no reply, then she said in a curiously hesitating way and with apparent irrelevance:

"Did that silly little Jimmy Barnett tell your brother I was engaged to Lieutenant Carew?"

"Jimmy Barnett? Lieutenant Carew? I'm sure I don't know; is it true, Kate?"

"Of course not; who ever heard of such a thing? But that foolish little Jimmy very impertinently went round saying so, and among other people he told me he had written it to your brother."

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“He probably said that to tease you. Fred never told me anything about it.”

“Well, I only mentioned it as an example of what we can do in town. So,” springing up, “you and I are to be left in our glory ; two lone ladies with no one to say us ‘Nay.’”

“Alone ? Do you think I ’m crazy ! Why, I should die of fright ; besides, Fred would n’t hear to such a thing. No, Aunt Margaret is coming up to stay with us.”

“To be our chaperon ! Dear old Mammy Margaret, how well I remember her.”

“You need n’t laugh,” I said. “I suspect she has more correct ideas than many a society leader.”

“My dear girl, let us hope so.”

“Listen,” I said. “Wheels ! that must be Mammy now. You know I always send the carriage for her on occasions like this ; it is a sort of official recognition of her status.”

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Dear old Mammy. I have only to close my eyes to see again the little bent figure, the wrinkled black face, and kindly eyes that never looked anything but affection on her children.

When Kate and I reached the gallery she had just been helped up the steps by Joe, who stood in great awe of her.

She was dressed, as she always was, in a black alpaca skirt and calico sacque. A faded brown shawl was pinned over her shoulders, and a spotless apron was tied about her waist. On her head was a black bonnet with a violet ribbon, and at her throat the pin Fred and I had given her years ago.

Heavy gold rings hung in her ears, and a bit of ribbon on her breast announced her membership in that exclusive organization, "The United Band of Good Samaritans."

When I rushed towards her she gathered me in her arms and held me

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close, just as she was wont to do when as a little child I fled to her to be comforted.

“Honey,” she said, looking at me with loving eyes, “huccome you ain’ bin ter see me lately?”

“I did ride past last week,” I answered; “but Betsey Ann told me you had gone up the bayou to visit your son. This is Miss Kate, Mammy; you surely have n’t forgotten her?”

“I reckon I ain’,” said the old woman, pressing the hand Kate gave her; “is you married yet, honey?”

“No, indeed, Mammy; I can’t find anybody who’ll have me.”

“Umph!” said Mammy. “Ise heerd tell of dat befo’. Well, don’ you be in a hurry; youse young yit, an’ you hez lots of time. Ter tell you de trufe, chile [to me], I always lowed ez Miss Kitty an’ Mass Fred ud mek a match.”

I glanced at Kate, but she seemed in no way disconcerted:

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“Do you think I’m good enough for your boy?”

Mammy looked critically at the lovely young face: “De Rasleys an’ de Faulkners kawnt be beat fur blood, an’, seein’ ez you is Rasley an’ Faulkner too, I lows ez you will do fus’ rate.”

“And the pity of it,” laughed Kate, “is that while I have your approval the gentleman has other views.”

“Mass Fred,” said Mammy solemnly, “ain’ de kine what tells his business. Some folkse talk all over dere mouths, but Mass Fred ain’ dat sort. He lays low, but when de proper time comes he kin arkinize wid de bes’.”

“Mammy,” said I, “you will sleep in my dressing-room as usual, so take off your bonnet and make yourself at home. And Priscilla has some hot coffee for you in the pantry.”

It was the half hour after tea, and Kate and I, in defiance of prudence, were strolling up and down the back gallery, wrapped in the light shawls

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Mammy had insisted upon our wearing. Kate had drawn the corner of hers over her head, and from beneath it her face, with its exquisite pallor and serious dark eyes, looked like a cameo.

The moon was shining through the oaks and the sky glistened with stars. From the garden came the delicious fragrance that had greeted us in the morning.

Kate had been telling me of her life, the endless round of dances and dinners that I knew so well from past experience, and as I listened it seemed to me that I understood as I had never understood before how impossible it was for any one reared in the country to become thoroughly in touch with town life. Involuntarily I stretched out my arms and drew a long, deep breath.

Kate looked at me wistfully.

“Do you know,” she said, “often, when I have been dressing for some fashionable affair, I have thought of

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you and envied you with all my heart. People said it was eccentric of you to turn your back on us as you did, and I suppose it was inexplicable to many, but I understood how, when your heart was heavy after Cousin Jean's death, you craved the peace of the woods and fields. How you longed to be far from the madding crowd, that is too self-absorbed to sympathize; to wear out your grief amidst the old scenes and the old associations, that, after all, have the strongest hold on our affections."

"It is true," I said, "there is healing in the solitude; strength in the quiet days; balm in the country blooms! Of course it is an absurd idea, but it seems to me that the sun shines differently here from what it does in town. Do you know that for the first time in my life I feel myself really an individual? For, there is no doubt about it, Kate, town life is very deadening to one's personality."

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“Undoubtedly,” she agreed. “Now, I don’t think I’m weaker than most people, but so often I find myself drifting with the tide, not raising my voice in protest against something I thoroughly disapprove of, because every one is in such a hurry that I easily persuade myself there is really no use of my speaking.

“Here one has time to be true to one’s self and to one’s convictions. It is a free life, a strong life, a good life, and I envy those who can live it.”

She turned towards me and I saw that her eyes were full of tears.

“I wish Fred could hear you,” I cried impulsively; “he said only yesterday that your idea of the country was a perpetual house-party.”

“He said that?” she murmured. “Does he think so badly of me? I thought he knew me better.”

“Chillun,” said Mammy from the door, “deres a gemman in de study ter see you-alls.”

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"Is he young?" asked I.

"Young enough," severely. "He's one of dem Donald boys, I reckon; he's got de Donald eyes."

"Oh, it's Charley!" I cried; "come on, Kate, he's been away for a month."

Mammy put out a detaining hand.

"Is you gwine in like dat? wid a smile on your face a foot wide? Lor', chile, whars de raisin' I gin you? In your ma's day a young lady 'd never hev thought of prancin' roun' like dat. Hit's jes' scandellus; I'clar ter gracious, hit is!"

"But, Mammy," I protested, "Charley Donald's one of my best friends."

"Is he your beau?" she asked with a directness that took my breath away; "kase, ef he ain', dat ain' no way ter welkum him."

"Hush," I said, in an agonized whisper; "he'll hear you."

"Well, I ain' got no objection. I ain' sayin' nothin' ter be ashamed of!"



*Mammy held out her
hand*

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Miss Mary, de way ter meet a young gemman what ain' nothin' but a fren' of de fambly is like dis." Mammy moved primly towards an imaginary caller and held out her hand :

" Good evenin', Mr. Donald ; Ise pleased ter see you. Hev a seat, sir, hev a seat. How 's de crop on your place ? Ise of de 'pinion dat de rains gwine ter flustrate de 'tintions of de planters. Sumpin' like dat, Miss Mary, sumpin' easy an' frenly but none of dat fly up de creek talk you wuz thinkin' 'bout."

" All right," I said with suspicious meekness, and Kate and I turned in the direction of the study, where we found Charley Donald impatiently awaiting us.

He advanced to meet us, but I fell back a step, dropped him a deep curtsey, and repeated slowly and impressively Mammy's stately greeting.

His bewilderment, until we explained, was really laughable, but when

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told about Mammy's zeal in our behalf he seemed greatly touched. "What a good old soul she is!" he said.

"Yes," I answered, "Mammy is a very dear old woman, and the only fault I can find with her is that she does n't believe in the Bible."

The door flew open and Mammy rushed in precipitately. "Miss Mary," she gasped, "what's dat youse sayin'? Don' 'bleeve in de Bible? Me, what's been a church-member nigh onter thirty years. Me, what wuz baptized by ole Brer George Washinton Hicks de year your ma wen' ter de White Sulphur Springs! Me, what ain' never danced a step or sot foot in a dancin'-room sense. Chile, huccum you run on like dat?"

"O Mammy! Mammy!" I laughed, "I knew you were at the key-hole, but I wanted to prove it. How true it is that listeners never hear any good of themselves."

"In cose I wuz dere," said Mammy;

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“an’ who’s got mo’ right? Ain’ you in my keer?”

“Kate,” said I, as Mammy departed, “when you go back you can tell the chaperons of your acquaintance of their new privilege — the right to listen at key-holes. But hev a seat, Mr. Donald; hev a seat!”

It could not have been more than an hour later that I heard Mammy call out to an imaginary caller:

“Well, good-night, chile, hit sho is gittin’ late; hit’s time you wuz at home in bade.”

I raised my voice to drown hers, for Charley was very entertaining and I saw no good reason for so early a dismissal.

Several minutes passed, then Mammy began locking doors and pulling down windows with such unnecessary clamor that Charley looked at me inquiringly:

“Mammy shutting up the house,” I said; “she always does it very early.”

He therefore proceeded with his

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story, and for a short time quiet reigned, then we heard distinctly eleven o'clock strike from some remote part of the house. I glanced at the mantel, forgetting the clock was at the jeweler's, and as Charley's breeding forbade his looking at his watch, with an apology for staying so late, he took his departure.

Then I rushed into the hall to find Mammy seated on the stairs armed with the dining-room tongs. She looked at me triumphantly.

"Did you make that horrid noise?" I demanded.

"I sholy did, chile, an' lemme tell you dis, ef dat young gemman had onsisted on stayin' arfter dat clock struck, I'd made up my mine jes' ter go in an' arsk him whar he wuz riz up not ter know hit's manners ter go home airly when de gemman of de house is gone?"

"O Mammy, Mammy!" cried Kate; "you are too correct for these degenerate days."

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“Too kerrect? Well, ter think I’d live ter see de day when Miss Sally’s chile ’ud say sech a thing? Lor’, Lor’, times sholy hev changed.”

“No, they have n’t, Mammy; I was in fun,” explained Kate.

“Dere’s fun an’ fun,” she replied, mollified but still stately; “howsom-ever, dat’s neider hyar nor dere, what I hez on my mine now is ter git you chillun ter bade. Gitter long, bofe of you; gitter long.”

Fred returned after two days’ absence, but looking so grave and thoughtful that I felt certain he had heard bad news.

Shortly after his arrival Kate considerately took herself to the garden, leaving us together on the gallery. Mammy was sweeping off the leaves and humming softly to herself:

“Oh, de human hyart’s a curous thing,
Cole ter de love dat ud closes’ cling!”

“Fred,” said I, “what’s the matter? You look as if you had had a shock.”

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

“I have,” he replied; “did you know Kate had won that LaGrange case of hers?”

“No, has she?” I exclaimed; “how glad I am!”

“Glad!” he repeated; “but of course you are, and so ought I to be, if I were not a selfish egotist; but don’t you see that this money (for there is a large amount involved) puts her forever out of my reach?”

“I don’t see how.”

“Don’t see? Why, Mary, it seems to me you would know that I would n’t ask a rich woman to marry me. What have I to offer her but a mortgaged plantation and a tumbled-down old house?”

“I feel rather sorry for her,” said I. “Do you mean that you would not ask her even if you knew she loved you?”

He set his lips. “In the first place I have no reason to think that; but even if I did [doggedly] my pride would not permit me to do so.”

❧ THE CHAPERON ❧

Mammy sent a pile of leaves flying.

"De human hyart is ez cole ez ice,
An Pride am de Debbil's mose faverrite vice,"
she sang.

"I thought you were broader-minded, Fred," I said; "I'm disappointed in you," and, rising, I started down the steps.

"Here are Kate's letters," he said.

I went slowly towards the garden, where I found Kate lying on the grass with her hands clasped behind her head, staring at the cloudless sky.

"It is a beautiful world, Mary," she said.

"It is not," I cried; "it's a horrid, stupid old world, and I hate it."

"Why, what has happened?" she asked; "anything about your brother?"

"Yes."

"Is he," hesitatingly, "in trouble?"

"Yes," I replied with a sensation of grim amusement.

"Oh, I am so sorry." She sat up and began opening her letters. "Could

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any one do anything to help him ? I mean," flushing, "is it money trouble ?"

"Well," I said truthfully enough, "money has something to do with it ; money, I've observed, usually is mixed up in our worries. But I'm afraid Fred would n't let you do anything."

"Why not ?"

"Oh, I don't know ; because men are queer, and very tiresome, too," I finished unpleasantly.

"O Mary !" cried Kate, "Aunt Jennie wants me to come home. She says she is not well and positively can't do without me ; that I must come back at once. I was afraid it would be like that when I left."

"Go right home ?" I repeated, "Your aunt is quite too foolish, Kate."

"No, she is very good to me, but you know her way."

"Yes," I answered. I knew her way ; in fact, I had been acquainted with it for some time, and it was n't a pleasant little way, either.

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“Well,” said Kate, rising, “it doesn’t do any good to worry over it, but it does seem rather absurd to leave town Monday and return on Thursday. I shall feel like the king of France and his ten thousand men.”

Mammy’s dismay when she heard of Kate’s contemplated departure was overwhelming. “Huccome you do sech a thing?” she asked; “ain’ you pleased hyar?”

“More than pleased, Mammy, it is not my fault; if I had my way —” she broke off and wandering to the window looked thoughtfully out into the yard.

Mammy pricked up her ears:

“We sho is gwine ter miss you,” she said.

Kate did not answer, but I saw her teeth close over her under lip:

“You is sech good cumpny fur Miss Mary, an’ I clar ter gracious I don’ see how Mass Fred’s gwine ter gitter long widout you!”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Mass Fred?” repeated Kate bitterly; “much he cares!”

“Chile,” said Mammy, crossing the room, “you is de apple of his eye. He farly wusships you; he hez your picter in a locket nex his hyart, an’ Ise seen him tek hit out an’ kiss hit time an’ time agin. [“Oh, shades of Ananias,” I thought.] One night larst summer he wuz mity seeck; he hed high fever an’ wuz mity bad off, an in de d’lirium he didn’ do nothin’ but call fur you. Hit wuz, ‘Kate! Kate! Kate!’ all night an’ all day. You kin arsk Miss Mary if hit warnt?”

I was mercifully spared the alternative of corroborating Mammy’s extraordinary tale or proving myself an unloving sister by a call from Fred, and, thankful for the interruption, I hastened to him. I was gone some time, but a few minutes afterwards I heard such agonizing groans from the study that dropping the roses I

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was arranging I rushed wildly in that direction.

Fred was just ahead and we entered the room together.

The scene before us was enough to startle any one's nerves.

Mammy was stretched on the hearth rug, writhing in pain, while Kate knelt by her, beseeching her to tell her what was the matter. With an exclamation of dismay Fred dragged down a pile of sofa cushions and crammed them beneath Mammy's head, while I turned and fled for camphor.

When I returned Mammy was quieter, but evidently in great agony still; every now and then she would open her eyes and look at us so lovingly that my heart fairly ached. Tears rained down Kate's cheeks, and Fred was very white.

"See here," he cried, "this can't go on; it may be very dangerous. I shall send Joe for the doctor."

Mammy stirred feebly :

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“Mass Fred,” she whispered, “don’ leave me; I likes ter know youse at han’. Is dat you, Miss Kate?”

“Yes, Mammy.”

“Chile, give me your hand.”

Kate, not dreaming what was to follow, held out her little, trembling fingers.

“Now yours, Mass Fred.”

Fred complied wonderingly, then Mammy with a great effort laid my cousin’s hand in my brother’s.

“Chillun,” she said tenderly, “you bofe love each other, but kase one’s reech an’ de other’s pore youse driftin’ apart. Don’ do hit, chillun; don’ do hit. Ise ole, an’ I knows de worl’, an’ lov’s de onliest thing wuth hevin’. Money an’ gran’ doin’s an’ de high places in de lan’ may satisfy some, but not you-all; you ain’ dat kine! Mass Fred,” coaxingly, “you knows you loves her; why don’ you tell her so?”

“Heaven help me! I love her better

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than my life! Kate," to the startled girl, "I never meant you to know, but if I had had anything to offer you I would have asked you to marry me long ago."

"And do you ask me now?" she said.

"Oh, yes, yes, if you will have me, though Heaven knows I recognize how unworthy I am."

"I love you," she said.

Mammy drew a long breath: "Miss Mary," she murmured, "hole dat camphor ter my nose. Lor', chile, but hit sho' is healin'. I begins ter feel easier already."

"Are you better, Mammy?" asked Kate.

"Yes, honey, but too many folkses roun' me huts my bref. Ef you an' Mass Fred 'ud move ter de winder, Miss Mary 'll keer fur me; won't you, Miss Mary?"

"Of course," said I, and as Kate and Fred moved reluctantly away Mammy

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shaded her face with her hand and gave me a most unmistakable wink behind it. I was not surprised, for I had already begun to suspect her.

“Chile,” she asked, when I signalled that I understood, “how soon do you think I kin git up? Hit’s powerful oncuffertubble lyin’ hyar.”

“Mammy,” whispered I, “after the fright you gave me I feel like leaving you there indefinitely, but since you tricked me in a good cause I’ll have pity. Fred, I wish you’d call Joe to help you to move Mammy to her room.”

“Let me send for the doctor!” urged he.

“No,” cried Mammy with surprising vigor. “I ain’ gwine ter hev no doctors foolin’ roun’ me. I’ll be all right in no time. Ise used ter dese little attacks, an’ dey soon wears off.”

A prophesy which proved correct, for when Kate came in in her traveling things to say good-by, she

❧ THE CHAPERON ❧

exclaimed, "Why, Mammy, no one would dream you had been ill."

"Miss Kate," said Mammy solemnly, "Ise got a soun' institootion an' I co-operate easily, but who kin tell," darkly, "some fine day I may go out jes' like a candle in de win'."

"Oh, don't say that," said the girl earnestly. "I want you to live for years and years. And be sure of this, Mammy, I shall never forget that but for you I would never have known happiness."

"Honey," said Mammy, suddenly conscience-stricken, "don' you be frettin' over me. I ain' so very seeck; leastways" — noting Kate's wondering expression — "tain' nothin' sose ter say dangerous. An' now good-by, chile; tek good keer of yourself, an' may de good Lord bless an' keep you always!"

V

A SOCIAL ADVISER

“**F**OR kingdom come, Miss Mary !
run hyar quick.”

Priscilla's agonized tones brought me rapidly to the library, where I found her mounted on the top step of the ladder, armed with a long-handled brush with which she had been polishing the countenances of my ancestors. Her eyes were twice their natural size.

“What's the matter now ?” I asked.

“Matter enuff, chile ; dis ole ladder's powerful onsartin an' jes now when I wuz dustin' ole marster off, hit peared ter me he kiner smile at me, same like he useter, 'n I wuz that skeered I cum mity nigh tumblin' off.”

I looked at the portrait of my stately old grandfather and frowned ;

❧ A SOCIAL ADVISER ❧

Priscilla's love of sensation was apt to carry her far, but hitherto she had respected my relatives.

"Don't be absurd!" I said crushingly, and instead of steadying the ladder, as was evidently expected of me, I crossed the room and retired to the shelter of the window-seat.

Priscilla, however, was not easily subdued; indeed, I had often said that to my mind she possessed all the qualifications of a great social leader, — sublime self-confidence and a magnificent capacity for ignoring snubs. So, having successfully inveigled me to the library, after a moment's silence she proceeded smoothly:

"Mass Fred's the livin' bornd image of ole marster. I sez ter Hinery yis-tiddy, 'Hinery,' sez I, 'if Mass Fred wuz ez ole ez he granpa, I clar ter gracious I cud n' tell de diffrence betwixt 'em.'"

Her conversational efforts fell unheeded, for I did not reply, but con-

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

tinued to gaze out of the windows at the vivid sweep of live-oak branches. Priscilla climbed down and moved the ladder before a portrait of my mother. "Lor'!" she said, passing the brush carefully over the lovely young face, "Lor'! Miss Mary, I members yo' ma's weddin' day same ez twuz yis-tiddy. She sho was a beauty, an' young too, jis nineteen when she married Mass Arthur." She paused and looked over at me, "Miss Mary, huccum you ain never married?"

"Because I never wanted to."

"I lows you hed lots of chances [graciously]. Modeste Powler says Betty Green tole her you done los de count of de gemman what axed you!"

Of course it was despicably weak, but I felt my heart warm towards Betty.

"She say how you wuz a ginuine belle in de city."

"Did she, indeed?" I said, feigning an indifference I was far from feeling; "that was certainly kind of her."

❧ A SOCIAL ADVISER ❧

“But, if you ain’ never hed no leanin’ ter marry, you done right ter stay single; an’ I reckon when you counts hit all up you hez choozed de better part.”

I laughed. “That is rather hard on Henry, Priscilla.”

“Hinery’s a good husban’ ez husban’s go, Miss Mary; but when a ’ooman marries she ain’ free no longer, she’s bleegeed ter insult anoder pusson ’bout every leetle thing she duz, an’ arfter awhile dat gits kiner wearin’.”

I did not tell Priscilla so, but in a crude way she had expressed my own objections.

“I wuz young an’ foolish when I married Hinery; he wuz de bes fiddler an’ dancer on de plantation, an’ de oder gals sho wuz arfter him, so I up an sez yes, ’fore I hed time ter think.”

“Well, he has been very good to you,” I said. “Mr. Fred thinks a great deal of Henry.”

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

Priscilla pursed up her lips, her glance intimated that she could tell much an she would, but aloud she said, "Ise got money laid up, Miss Mary. I reckon hit's wuth while fur Hinery ter consort heself right wid me. My ma sez ter me de night I wuz married, 'Sylla,' sez she, 'don' you never let Hinery git hole of what you makes; he'll rispict you ef you hez money of yo' own.' An' Miss Mary, chile, I ain' never furgot dat advice. She wuz a good 'ooman, my ma."

"Poor Henry!" thought I.

"'Tain no use talkin, Miss Mary; ef you wants peace youse bleeged ter take a stan' frum de fus. Now deres Hinery, you mightn' think hit, but he wuz ez skittish ez a colt when I married him."

"I certainly would n't have thought so!" I replied devoutly, remembering the meek-faced little man who called Priscilla wife.

"Hinery sho wuz mannish, Miss

¶ A SOCIAL ADVISER ¶

Mary, but I tuk hit all out'n him de fus year." She chuckled appreciatively.

As I betrayed no wild interest in her matrimonial experiences she proceeded to change the subject with startling abruptness :

"Miss Mary," with the familiarity of an old servant, "is Mass Phil Rainey yo' beau?"

"Of course not," I answered warmly; "he's a friend of Mr. Fred's."

"A fren' of Mass Fred's," she repeated thoughtfully; "a mity good fren', I reckon, seein' ez he's hyar once a week an' sometimes mo'." I did not answer.

"I members Mass Phil when he warnt no bigger'n my Benjie. He's downrite hansom, Mass Phil is, but he ain much on talkin, is he? Ter tell you de trufe, Miss Mary, I lows ez you talks too much ter Mass Phil. You gits him kiner flapdazzled, an' don' 'low him a chance ter git a word in aidgewise."

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

I stared at Priscilla in speechless indignation.

“De oder nite when I wuz fixin de hall lamp I tuk note dat you did all de talkin’. Mass Phil he laff an’ laff, but he ain’ never ascertained no subject fur heself.”

“Priscilla!” I cried with flaming cheeks, “you had better go on with your dusting.”

“In a minnit, Miss Mary, in a minnit; but Ise hed hit in my mine dis long time ter tell you dis, an’ Ise bleeged ter eend hit. I members hearin’ Miss Sally say [‘Sally’ was Kate’s mother and a thorough flirt], — she an’ yo’ ma wuz in de gardeen, — sez she, ‘Jean,’ sez she, ‘when I likes a man I never talks, kase I wants ter hear what he’s got ter say; an’ when I don’t like him I ain’t sayin’ nothin’ neider, kase de sooner he sez what’s in he mine de sooner Ise done wid him.’ An’ Miss Mary [grinning,] I ’lows Miss Sally knowed.”

❧ A SOCIAL ADVISER ❧

Apparently I was not listening, but in reality Priscilla's suggestion was by no means lost upon me. Phil Rainey was a thorn in my path, and from all appearances intended to remain there indefinitely. I had known him as a child, and upon my return to the plantation, after my mother's death, he had taken up the old friendship with much enthusiasm.

A slim, dark fellow, with a ready laugh and no conversation, he called often and again at Southmeade, boring me to extinction and furnishing Fred with abundant material for teasing.

It was true, as Priscilla had impertinently stated, that I led the conversation, but if I had not we should have gazed at each other in silence.

But Cousin Sally's maxim in Priscilla's words set me to thinking, and to such purpose that when Fred tapped at my door that evening, facetiously remarking that "my little playmate was in the library," I went to meet

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

him resolved to try the magic effects of stupidity.

The result was amazing. After one or two fruitless efforts to lead me out and finding me utterly unresponsive, Phil pulled his chair closer to mine and proceeded to entertain me.

My dullness seemed to stimulate him, for the quieter I grew the gayer he became; whether he attributed my apathy to sudden self-consciousness I do not know, but before long he had launched into a conversation of so personal a type that Priscilla could no longer accuse him of not "ascertaining" a subject. In a comparatively short time he had ascertained a great deal and given me ample food for reflection.

Priscilla met me with my lamp just after his departure, and the expression in her eyes was difficult to ignore. I did so, however, and went yawning off to bed.

A night or two after, Phil, finding me so curiously pensive and embold-

◀ A SOCIAL ADVISER ▶

ened by my determined silence, gave me the opportunity of saying once and forever whether he found favor in my sight or not.

It was not easy to convince him that he did not, but after the use of a good quantity of plain English it dawned on him that I was serious, and a few minutes later he dashed out for his horse and rode angrily away.

“Miss Mary,” said Priscilla the following week, “huccum Mass Phil Rainey don’ cum hyar no mo’?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” I replied idly.

Priscilla looked at me with grave approbation.

“Dat’s rite, honey,” she said; “don’ never tell yo’ bizness ter noboddy. But, arfter all, I reckons you’ bleeves now Miss Sally knowed what she wuz talkin’ ’bout.”

VI

UNCLE EPHR'UM

THE plantation carriage with Uncle Ephr'um on the box was at the steps :

“It 's long after eleven,” called Fred. “You 'll be awfully late.”

“Strange,” I mused, “the zeal people who are not going to church display in getting other people off.”

“Uncle Ephr'um,” I observed, “it seems to me the mules look very rough.” For be it known to all men, and to all women too, alas, that carriage horses have ceased to be at Southmeade.

“Dey suttently duz,” he assented, “but hit kawnt be helped ; when de hair gits long an' fuzzy de dus' will show.”

UNCLE EPHR'UM

“But,” I continued warmly, “the dust would n't show if it was n't there.”

“Dat's true, chile, dat's puffedtly kerrect, but you see hit is dere.”

I climbed in meekly, the hopelessness of suggesting that a curry-comb might mend matters having been demonstrated too often for me to attempt it now.

“Poor old carriage!” I reflected; “poor old, dilapidated coachman!” as my eyes wandered from the dingy curtains and battered woodwork to the shabby old man in front.

I took a mental inventory of his costume, a process which I found highly stimulating to the memory. His hat, I recalled, was a gift from me in recognition of his services as a moss-picker; his coat Fred gave him the day he killed the rattlesnake; his trousers —

“Uncle Ephr'um,” I asked suddenly, “did you know two hens had disappeared from the henhouse last night?”

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

“You don’ sesso?”

“But I do,” I replied irritably; “and, what is more, I know who took them.”

He glanced around, and to look at him one would have said that his greatest desire in life was to aid me in tracking down the thief.

“Yes,” I continued triumphantly, “Priscilla and I found a plank knocked off and a hole in the wall just big enough for Joe to slip through.” (Joe was his nephew.)

Uncle Ephr’um’s glance, which had been eager, became full of reproach; I felt like a criminal, like one who had wounded another in his tenderest and most sacred feelings.

“Miss Mary,” he said, “dat don’ soun’ like you. I ’lows dat no-coun’ Priscilla —”

“Priscilla had nothing to do with it,” I retorted. “By the way, did you tell the carpenter to come up and look at that gate?”

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“Yes ’m, an’ he cum up an’ looked at hit.”

For a moment indignation rendered me speechless, the gate in question being still in the last stages of disrepair; then I said in tones of such concentrated sarcasm that even Uncle Ephr’um wilted, “I thought I was dealing with people who had a little common sense, but it seems I was not. This time I will be more explicit; be good enough to tell Jim to mend the gate, straighten the hinges, fix the latch.”

“Now, now,” said the old man soothingly, “’tain no use gittin’ mad ’bout hit; hit don’ do a single mite of good.” And while inwardly protesting I knew he spoke the truth.

So I fell into a moody silence and was jogged along to church in anything but a Christian frame of mind. All at once my reflections were cut short by the mules swerving suddenly across the road.

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

“What on earth is the matter?” I asked.

“’Tain’ nothin’ but one of dem bike-lists,” said Uncle Ephr’um.

“Stop!” I cried, for at the edge of the drive was a broken bicycle with a man lying face downwards beside it. “The poor fellow is hurt.”

“Lor’!” continued the dusky Levite, “what bizness is hit of ourn?”

“Get down this instant,” I said, and I leaned over and caught the reins with that in my tone and manner, a suspicion of the Rasley stateliness, that sent Uncle Ephr’um scrambling from his perch.

Stooping he lifted the young man and turned his face to the sun.

“He done dade,” he said.

“Nonsense,” I replied, “give him a mouthful of whiskey.”

“Whiskey,” in an injured tone, “whar I gwine git enny?”

“Out of your pocket,” for I knew his custom.

◀ UNCLE EPHR'UM ▶

So with great reluctance he produced a bottle with a corn-cob stopper and poured a little of the cheering liquid down the stranger's throat.

"Tain' no good, Miss Mary," he said.

"It is," I answered; "I saw him move. Now, look here, we must get him back to Southmeade. Take him up, I'll help you with him; there," lifting his head gently, "get into the carriage. Poor fellow!" as a groan escaped the unconscious lips, "we're doing the best we can for you."

"Whose gwine ter drive," asked Uncle Ephr'um.

"I am," and I climbed up and took the reins.

"De Lord hev mussy on us!" was the devout response.

The road was lonely and we met no one.

We found Fred on the front gallery much disturbed over our speedy return.

"What's up?" he cried, running down the steps; "and what on earth

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

are you doing up there? By George!" after a glance at Uncle Ephr'um's burden.

I sprang down and in a few rapid words explained the situation, then, leaving them to get the sufferer to Fred's room, I flew in search of Priscilla.

"Priscilla," I cried from the back steps (our kitchen, like all plantation ones, being some distance from the house); "Priscilla, have you seen Joe?"

Priscilla appeared, — a much be-floured figure.

"I sont him fur some wood 'bout two hours ago, an' I ain' nuver seed him sence."

"Call him! I want him immediately."

So nothing loath she sent her voice across the yard: "Joe! O Joe! You Joe!"

No answer.

"Horrid little boy," I cried despair-

◀ UNCLE EPHR'UM ▶

ingly, "he shan't have that hat of Mr. Fred's. I know he hears."

"Lor', Miss Mary," cried Priscilla, "yander's Joe now ;" and from beneath the steps where I am standing crawls the truant.

"Why did n't you come before ?" I asked angrily.

"I nuvver knowed you wanted me."

"You did n't hear us shrieking over this yard ?"

"No 'm." Again the hopelessness of argument is borne in upon me.

"Go round to the steps," I said, "and take the carriage for Doctor Starr ; ask him to come back with you ; say that a young gentleman has been badly hurt."

Joe lingered :

"Well, what are you waiting for ?"

"'Tain' Mr. Fred's what hut ?"

"Certainly not ; now hurry," and as the little black figure vanished I ran to the kitchen to consult with Pris-

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

cilla over the relative merits of ice and hot water for bruises.

It was six weeks later, and my patient (as Fred insisted on calling him, though Mammy Margaret was his real nurse) had for a week now been able to leave his room and sit on the gallery in the shade of the Maréchal Niel rose. He was still pale and showed the effects of his illness, but I found myself thinking how handsome he must be when strong and well.

Clever, courteous, and absurdly grateful for the little we were able to do for him, he was a pleasant addition to our small household, to whom anything in the way of an excitement was welcome.

In a short while we had learned much about him ; he was a New Yorker (one of the Allen-Delanceys), and, having come South for pleasure, was wheeling through the country when the accident occurred that brought him into our quiet lives.

◀ U N C L E E P H R ' U M ▶

It did not take long to discover that his half-sister had married one of our cousins, and that we had numerous other mutual friends.

It seemed that we had just missed each other at the Greenbriar, and that he had intended sailing on the very steamer Kate and I returned in when a cablegram altered his plans.

He told me this last bit of news as we sat on the gallery one day, and I exclaimed :

“ What a tiny little world it is, after all ! ”

“ Not so very small,” he said. “ It is wide enough at times, but it only proves, what I have always contended, that nothing can keep people apart whom Fate wills to bring together.”

“ Do you really think that ? ”

“ Yes, I do, and I cannot be too grateful that Fate took interest enough in my affairs to send my wheel into a rut ; if she had not I would have gone home with a lot of superficial informa-

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

tion about Louisiana, but minus an experience that I would not forego for all the aching ankles in the world."

"You have been unusually favored," I said; "tourists generally see us from the outside, but you have known us as we really are. You have lifted the curtain and seen something of our home life, with its droll makeshifts and petty trials, its simplicity and genuineness and frank poverty. You have understood as perhaps few Northerners do the exact relation between the old slaves and their masters' children and grandchildren."

"Yes," he said. "To Mammy's nursing I owe my health. To Uncle Ephr'um many a hearty laugh. To your brother an acquaintance with brave young manhood I shall never forget, and to you —"

The rose I held snapped suddenly, and as he stooped to pick it up he said again, with a rush of tenderness in his voice, "and to you —"

¶ UNCLE EPHR'UM ¶

“Miss Mary,” said Uncle Ephr'um, from the steps, “Mass Fred wants you in de gardeen.”

I went, though I confess very reluctantly, for it is not agreeable to have the cup snatched away just as it is held to your lips, and I heard Uncle Ephr'um say as I moved away, “Yes, boss, de Rasleys an' de Faulkners, deys bin folks of consularity ever sence ole Kilumbus diskivered Ameriky.”

After finding the flower-seed Fred wanted I returned to the house, but instead of rejoining Mr. Delancey on the gallery I wandered into the library and struck a few chords on the piano to indicate my whereabouts.

But though I waited fully a half hour no one came. Then with rising anger I opened the window and looked onto the porch.

Seeing it deserted I went out immediately.

Uncle Ephr'um, alone in his glory, was training a climbing rose and

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

mounted on an upturned barrel which threatened every moment to collapse with him.

“Why not get the ladder?” I said, knowing that it had been long broken, awaiting his attention.

“Dis is good enuff fur me,” he said; “times ain’ what dey wuz, an’ ef ole marster’s grandchillun kin be so frenly wid a Yankee I reckon I ain’ too proud ter stan’ on a barrel.”

“Absurd!” I cried. “Mr. Delancey is a gentleman; any one would be glad to entertain him. Besides,” noting his expression, “we only did our duty.”

“Umph,” said Uncle Ephr’um.

“Mary,” said Fred, joining me a short while later, “did you know Delancey was going away to-morrow?”

“What?” I cried.

“Yes, I have just parted with him; he says he has received letters (the usual excuse) that require his immediate return. Do you know if anything could have happened to annoy him?”

UNCLE EPHR'UM

“Certainly not.” Then as the reflection of our conversation came back to me, with the unfinished sentence that might have meant so much, the bitter doubt arose that perhaps he had repented of his impulsive speech, and thought it wise to go away.

“I know of no reason,” I repeated, conscious of my burning cheeks. “But above all things do not persuade him to stay. He knows his own affairs best, and protestations might embarrass him. You know we Southerners are very warm-hearted, and he might mistake civility for gush.”

“Mary!” exclaimed Fred, “that doesn’t sound a bit like you! And why should you fear Delancey’s misunderstanding us? He’s too good a fellow for that.”

“Granted,” said I; “but, all the same, I would not toll the bells or wear sackcloth and ashes over his departure. He will respect you all the more if you do not.”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

In spite of my sage advice Fred showed great regret when Hugh Delancey stepped languidly into the carriage that was to carry him to the station, but I made up for it by such a show of cheerful resignation that Fred told me afterwards I had been actually rude.

“Good-by again, Miss Rasley,” called our visitor. “I shall never forget Southmeade or your kindness to the stranger within your gates.”

“Good-by,” I replied. “Here Flip, race with me to the garden,” and as the carriage rolled away Hugh Delancey saw me skimming across the yard as though there were no such word as regret in my vocabulary.

It must be admitted, however, that my indifference was only a poor pretence, for the days that followed showed me only too plainly that with our guest had gone a goodly share of my interest in life. I had never known what it was to “miss” any one

◀ UNCLE EPHR'UM ▶

before ; hitherto my simple interests and trivial occupations had completely filled my days ; but now —

I grew restless and fretful ; I waged daily battles with Priscilla ; I was coldly sarcastic to Uncle Ephr'um and absolutely intolerant of Joe.

Once, even, I answered Fred shortly ; a proceeding which so dismayed him that I think he had serious doubts of my sanity. Mammy came to see me often in those days, and though she never said anything I knew she thought me looking wretchedly.

She always inquired for “Mr. Hugh,” and when I told her of the books and music he had sent me, and his long letters to Fred, she seemed to be greatly puzzled.

“I 'lowed es you hed sont him away,” she said.

“What do you mean ?” I asked.

“Why, chile, I knowed he wuz in love wid you, and I thought you 'd tole him dere warn' no hope fur him.”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Did you?” I said with a mirthless laugh; “you’re a very clever old woman, Mammy, but even you can make mistakes. Did he send you the tobacco he promised?”

“Yessum, a big box, an’ he sont some ter Ephr’um too; somehow Ephr’um did n’ seem ter be pleased wid hit. Pears ter me he’s been kiner low-sperritted lately. Hez you ob-sarved hit?”

“No,” I answered, truthfully enough, for I was too much absorbed in my own grievances to be watchful of other people’s. “No, I never noticed anything.”

“He tole me he don’ sleep at night, an’ he hez mizry in he back jes’ orful.”

“Poor old man,” I said compassionately, and after Mammy had departed I went into the vegetable garden, where Uncle Ephr’um was working on his tomato plants, and proceeded to question him about his health.

¶ U N C L E E P H R ' U M ¶

To my surprise he did not take my inquiries in good part :

“Huccome you ax me how I is?” he said. “Ain’ I doin’ my work right? Is I gittin’ onkeerful? If I is, jes’ you tell me so immejiate-like, an’ don’ you beat ’roun’ axin’ me how I is.”

“Dear me! all this temper because of a civil question! Uncle Ephr’um, I’m afraid something’s seriously the matter with you; what have you got on your conscience?”

He started perceptibly. “What’s dat?” he asked; “what’s dat you say? Ef Ise done wrong, I done hit fur de bes’ so I ain’ got no cause fur ter be oncomfortubble.”

“Have n’t you?” said I, more for the sake of argument than from honest conviction; “well, I don’t know about that. If some one else is mixed up with it, I expect they would have something to say about it.”

“Hit were done fur de bes,” he repeated.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Oh, well, I suppose you know your own affairs,” I said and I glanced listlessly at the white-starred blackberry vines wreathing the fence. “Uncle Ephr’um, why don’t you cut those down?”

“I ain’ got de hyart ter do hit, chile, deys so determinated an’ so fergivin’. Ef you chops em down terday deys back by termorrer. Dey warnt doing noboddy enny harm, so I ’cluded ter jes’ leave em dere.”

I smiled. “I hope you are as thoughtful of people,” I said. “If it pains you so to see a plant suffer, I suppose you could not bear to hurt any one’s feelings.”

“Not pupposely, Miss Mary; not pupposely,” he replied. I looked at him in surprise. Evidently I had touched upon a sore subject.

“Talkin’ ’bout sick folkses,” he said, “I ’d like ter know what ails you, chile? You is ez white ez dat flower yander, an’ I never hears

UNCLE EPHR'UM

you singin' roun' de house likes you useter."

The blood swept to my brow. Had I taken my trouble so to heart that even the servants observed it? Surely I must be daft to so forget my pride!

"It's this warm weather," I said, "nothing more!" and I sauntered away with my head held high.

I think it was that night that Priscilla came in to borrow a stamp.

"Fur Uncle Ephr'um," she announced; "Joe's writin' a letter fur him."

"Look in that little box!" I said, and as she moved away I wondered languidly who Joe's correspondent was, and little dreamed that his letter had any connection with my affairs.

For the next few days Uncle Ephr'um went about with such an air of mystery that Fred asked him if he was n't in love, a question which was very badly received.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Me?” he exclaimed indignantly; “huccum you poke fun at a pore ole nigger, Mass Fred?”

“Love’s no fun,” said Fred; “it can play the very mischief with you sometimes.”

They were just outside my window, Fred feeding a pet rooster and Uncle Ephr’um raking leaves.

“I reckon hit duz, Mass Fred. Ise seen some folkses what hit peers ter farly onsettle. Now dar wuz Mr. Delancey, he sholy did hev hit bad.”

“Oh, shut up,” cried Fred; “can’t you tell the difference between love and a sprained ankle?”

“Yes, sir,” was the dignified response; “an’ ’fore dis week’s out you’ll see dat I knows what Ise talkin’ ’bout.”

“Uncle Ephr’um,” said Fred, getting up and strolling away, “if you’d like an order for the doctor you can have it. I fear there’s something terribly out of gear in your brain.”

Uncle Ephr’um chuckled. “You



*"Huccum you poke fun at
a pore old nigger?"*

UNCLE EPHR'UM

kin laff," he said, "but jes' you wait an' see."

It was two days later and noonday. Across the pastures came the whistle of the coming train, the clang of the plantation bell.

From my bench in the garden I saw Joe ride down the avenue with the mail-bag, then Uncle Ephr'um jog past in the cart. Fred called out to him not to forget the newspaper, and Flip trotted as far as the gate, then feeling that he had done his duty returned to finish his nap out on the rug.

The sky was as blue as a mountain-lake ; the air heavy with fragrance.

With a sigh I folded my arms, leaned my cheek on them, and gave myself up to sombre thoughts.

How long I remained thus I do not know, but the click of the garden-gate and a man's step on the path made me lift my head.

"Miss Rasley," cried Hugh Delan-

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

cey, "before you even greet me let me show you what brings me here. This will be an explanation of much that has puzzled me; an explanation that I feel sure will satisfy even your pride," and before I could protest he put a letter into my hand.

"From Uncle Ephr'um," he said, "received two days ago. But read it, I beg of you."

So, while he stood bareheaded with the sunshine playing round him, I read, now with a smile and now with a sigh, the letter Joe had written, and which my stamp had carried safely to its destination:

"HONORED MR. HUGH DELANCEY

"respected Sir, — i takes my pen in han ter write you dese few lines ter say ez i is enjyein good helth an hopes youse bein blest wid de same — respected Sir, the honor of addressin' you is sich ez i never expected ter enjye but felin ez i hez done you rong an sein ez our young Lady is fadin away afore our eyes I sez ter myself sez i de trufe mus be told dough i wines up in de leetle eend of de horn — hon-

UNCLE EPHR'UM

ored an respected Sir — you members dat day we wuz talkin tergedder on de front galry an i tole you bout mass charlie donels bein miss Marys beau — ef you rekillex i sed dey wuz gwine ter be married rite arfter easter well i ain menin ter tell you no lie but i handled de trufe mity keerless like — kase mass charlies bin kotin miss Mary ever sense dey wuz chillun an ten or twelve mo gemman too i disremembers dere names — but she ain never showed no favor to none of em ceppen hit wuz you.

i tole you what i did kase i thot hit wuz a down rite shame fur ole marsters grandchile ter marry a yankee what fit agin wealls an ennyhow i lowed ez dere wuz heaps of pritty ladies in de norf what ud make you a good an fitten wife an noo yorks too far away fur miss Mary ter go.

seein howsomever ez shese pinin fur you an bein ez ise so lowsperited over de way she don sing an laff roun de place like she useter i done fixed hit up in my mine ter tell you de trufe an let you percedify fur yoself.

“honored an respected Sir your obejient sarvant, ef'rum gabul.

“miss Mary don know nothin bout dis jes me an joe an ise promist him a lickin ef he tells ennyboddy.”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

The letter drifted to the ground ; I held out my hands with a smile :

“ You are sure you wanted to come ?
You had not forgotten ? ”

“ You know,” answered Hugh.

“ But the pretty ladies at the North,”
I suggested.

“ I prefer a pretty lady at the South,”
he said.

VII

AT MADAME JEAN'S

I CLIMBED the levee slowly, for the bank was steep. Flip trotted briskly ahead while Joe idled languidly in the rear.

The sun was setting and the western sky blazed with color. Crimson and gray and gold, the shifting cloud-banks, dashed here and there with fleecy white, were a feast to the eye, a delight to the soul.

"The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork," I quoted dreamily.

Then my gaze wandered to the bayou, to remain momentarily transfixed with consternation and surprise.

It had been many weeks since I had last climbed the levee, and back among

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

the Southmeade oaks it had been easy to forget the treacherous enemy at our gates.

It is true I had heard Fred fretting over his levees, but I had listened to the same story every spring of my life ; true, too, that our visitors frequently referred to the unprecedented rise in the bayou, but I had thought them over-anxious, and it was not until now, when I stood on the frail earth-wall and saw the water whirling and tearing at my feet, that I realized the danger.

My courage failed me, for it seemed such a hopeless task to seek to defend ourselves against this resistless force.

I had started out in good spirits, in answer to Priscilla's request to buy her some brahma eggs from Madame Jean, an old creole woman who lived above us, but my heart sank and a dull despair settled over me as I walked along, reflecting that in an instant our old home, the broad fields, the toil and

¶ AT MADAME JEAN'S ¶

hopes of years, might be swept out of existence.

Madame Jean's one-story house, with the unplastered walls and leaning mud chimney, was set some distance back from the road; on one side was a stagnant pond, the haunt of innumerable frogs; on the other the remains of a house begun years ago and never finished. I remembered driving past there as a wee child, and hearing my father say, "That house was begun when I was a boy."

A tiny garden enclosed Madame Jean's cottage, filled to overflowing with periwinkles, larkspurs, coxcombs, phlox, and long-stemmed lilies. A red rose had flung itself to the top of a china tree, and a yellow jessamine covered a rude arbor near the gate. The beds were marked off with inverted ale bottles, and a freshly bricked path led up to a spotless step. It seemed to be, in its purity and freshness, the very abode of peace.

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

I pushed the wistaria vine aside and knocked on the wall, for the door was wide open, a white cotton curtain waving in the breeze. While I waited I turned aside to admire the scarlet geraniums growing in an old pirogue, swung at one end of the gallery. Having grown unfit for swamp use any longer, it had been thrown aside to be converted by thrifty Madame Jean into a flower-box.

I was bending over it when a step sounded behind me and Madame's soft voice said, "*Bon soir, mademoiselle; eet has been one long time sence you have been here.*"

"Too long, madame," I responded cordially; "but I am a very busy person, for all you may hear to the contrary, and, as you know, am nothing of a visitor. You have been well, I hope?"

"Very well, thank you, mademoiselle."

Her tone was cheerful, yet in some

¶ AT MADAME JEAN'S ¶

indefinite way she gave me the impression of suffering. I glanced at her quiet face, framed in smooth bands of silver hair, and decided that I was fanciful.

“Won’t you come in?” and she led the way to the parlor. The floor was bare but spotless, the furniture of the simplest quality, but the hide-bottomed chairs were comfort itself, and the orange-flower syrup, presently brought in to me, a drink fit for the gods.

After a few minutes’ desultory chat I acquainted Madame Jean with the motive of my errand, and she disappeared to see if she could supply the demand. She soon returned with a huge gourd filled with rich yellow eggs.

“One dozen and two,” she counted slowly. “Weel that do, mademoiselle?”

“It will have to do,” I laughed. “Indeed, I’m only too grateful for any; I hope you are not depriving yourself.”

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

“*Non, non*, eet is a pleasure; and, what is more, I can never do too much for your mother’s child.”

I had never known what it was, but some long-ago kindness of my mother’s had lingered in her memory with a faithfulness not often to be met with nowadays.

“Have you heard from ’Tasie lately?” I asked, rising regretfully, for the little room had an out-of-the-world charm of its own.

Madame did not reply, and, thinking she had not understood, I repeated the question.

“You have not heard, then?” she said in a low, shamed voice. “But of course they would not tell you.”

“Heard?” I repeated stupidly. “What do you mean?”

“Do not ask me,” she broke out passionately. “It is not for you to take her name upon your lips. I know not what has become of her, — where she has gone. She is nothing

¶ AT MADAME JEAN'S ¶

to me, — nothing !” and she threw out her hands in a bitter gesture of repudiation.

A vision of the little, dark-browed child who had grown like a flower under Madame's tender care flashed before me, — the innocent face, the laughing eyes.

“ Sometimes I think the good God has forgotten me,” went on Madame. “ Father Pierre, he comes and talks to me ; and your priest, — your Monsieur Pyrl, came to see me the other morning. He was kind, he seemed to understand, to know what I felt ; but my heart here is like ice,” and she laid her hand on her breast.

“ I am very sorry for you,” I said, feeling my utter inadequacy, for I had never encountered tragedy of this type before.

“ If she had killed me with her own hands it would have been better.”

“ Madame Jean,” I said, speaking with an impulse rare in one so consist-

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

ently conservative, "this is a hard world; cruel and unforgiving, especially to women. Would it not grieve you to think you had made it harder for some other poor human being, and that a creature of your own flesh and blood?"

"She has shamed me," she murmured. "I never want to see her face again."

"You think not, but you miss her all the time. Poor 'Tasie! who could have dreamed of this? She was such a happy little child."

A stifled cry broke from Madame: "She is a weecked girl, mademoiselle; you should not speak of her."

"If, some day, she is sorry and comes back to you, you will not turn her away, will you?"

She did not reply.

"You would not, Madame Jean, you know you would not;" and I bent my eyes on her face, concentrating all the force of my earnest and sincere

¶ AT MADAME JEAN'S ¶

feeling upon her. "You said you could not do too much for my mother's child; do this for me: Promise me, you will take her back."

"Mon Dieu! what is it to you? Why should you care?" she broke out.

"She is a woman," I said gently, hardly realizing that the contrast between my own happy life and the other's wretched existence was the secret of my compassion.

"Be it so," she said sullenly. "If she comes back I will take her in, but she will never come!"

Late that evening Fred found me sitting on the front steps, dreaming. The moon was up and the branches of the oak trees sparkled with fireflies. A little breeze fragrant with roses stole round the corner of the house, the air echoed to the cheerful call of insects.

We seemed to be in a world of our own; a world of peace and quiet, far

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

from pain and trouble and heartbreak. The old, old riddle of the why and wherefore of existence, the meaning of sin and sorrow, crept into my mind, but I put it from me with decision :

“ I did not understand, but all was for the best ! ”

“ I wish you could see yourself,” said Fred, glancing at me affectionately ; “ your face looks like a prayer. I’ll bet you, ten to one, you were thinking of Delancey.”

“ I was,” I answered, with a swift rush of pity for others less fortunate. “ I was thanking God, fasting, for a good man’s love.”

VIII

THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN

I thought it rather hard Priscilla should follow me to the garden, whither I had taken myself for the express purpose of enjoying my own society, but scarcely was I established before she arrived, smiling and urbane, and so perfectly sure of a welcome as to be peculiarly exasperating.

I had told Fred only a day or two past that if one was polite one was sure to be imposed upon, and Priscilla was a constant reminder of this unhappy fact.

"You looked so lonesome, Miss Mary," she said, seating herself on the grass, "dat I 'lowed I'd jine you ; 'tain' good fer young folkse ter flock by deyselves ; 'sides Ise in trubble, an' I wants you ter vise me."

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

She settled her pan of peas on her knee, drew a long breath, and, without waiting to hear whether I was prepared to give my assistance, plunged into her narrative.

“Deres one thing 'bout you, Miss Mary,” she remarked; “youse young but you knows a lot. I reckon dat cums frum livin' in de city; and now you stays in de country you members what you knowed. I 'lows dere ain' many folkses kin git ahead of you.”

This delicate tribute (coming from such a source) was of course appreciated.

“You do me too much honor,” I murmured.

“No 'm, you sarves every word of hit. Me an' Hinery wuz talkin' 'bout you de oder night, an' Hinery he up an' sez, 'Priscilla,' sez he, 'eddcation is one thing an' brains anoder, but mixin' wid folkses an' onderstannin' dere ways is bettern all; an' dats how hit is wid Miss Mary.'”

❧ THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN ❧

I realized at once that this speech (intended to be complimentary) would not bear investigation, so I said hastily :

“ Well, what can I do for you ? ”

“ You kin hep me a lot, Miss Mary ; hits Sally-Ann what's in trubble. Yessum, Sally ain' had no luck sence de day she wuz bornd ; fus tunnin' a kittle of bilin' water over herself when she warnt no mo'n a baby, den bein' runned by a cow crossin' thru' Mrs. Dameron's parsture, an' hyar lately gwine an' gittin' kunjered by dat no count leetle gal what cooks fur Mister Lagroue.”

“ Angie ! ” I exclaimed.

“ Yessum, an' alongst of a squint-eyed nigger what ain' wuth de shotter kill him wid.”

“ If he's all that,” I said, “ why should Sally-Ann want him ? ”

“ Miss Mary, dere ain' no countin' on gals ; Ise lived a long time an' Ise lunned a heap, but Ise never con-

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

structed myself ez ter what a gal's gwine ter do! Nathan Lewis, de nigger what's brung all de 'citement, wuz keepin cumpny wid Sally (dey wuz traduced at de picnic what de congregation of Blessed Sinners guv at de Grove); an', seein' ez Sally ain' nothin' on looks, an' warnt likely ter git anoder chance, me an' Hinery 'cided ter make no 'jections ter de match.

"Everything was gwine on smooovely when Sally-Ann ain' hed no better sence den ter 'vite Angie ter supper one night when Nathan wuz dere. Well, Miss Mary, you may n't 'bleeve hit, but she ain' mo'n set eyes on dat nigger 'fore she gin ter 'tract him; sich gwines on I never seed.

"Sally-Ann she ain' dun nuffin but cry all night, an' Hinery he sez ter her, sez he, 'You got jes' what you sarved, ain' got no mo' gumtion den ter ax dat gal hyar. I reckon you'll know better nex' time.' Well, Miss

¶ THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN ¶

Mary, Nathan ain' bin nyar us sence, ceppen once, an' den twuz ter ax Hinery fur de loan of a quarter; an' Sally-Ann she's bin gwine roun' like a seeck chicken, never talkin' ter noboddy, an' not sleepin', an' actin' so contrary dat we knows Angie's done kunjered her."

"Nonsense," said I. "I suspect Sally is low-spirited and you are too easily frightened."

"No, ma'am, she's bin kunjered; Monday night de fedders in her piller wuz cram full of lumps."

"That often happens."

"An' larst night she foun' a dade chicken hade in her bade."

"The cat took it in there, of course; people don't conjure each other nowadays."

"White folkses don', Miss Mary, but niggers duz; an' Ise dat on-settled 'bout Sally dat Ise pretty nigh 'stracted. Hinery sez ter me ez he wuz levin' dis mornin', 'Priscilla,' sez

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

he, 'why don' you insult Miss Mary? Dere ain' nothin' she kawnt do, an' ef you splains de sark'mstances of de case I 'low she'll 'vise something ter set things straight.'"

"Henry overrates my abilities," I remarked, not caring whether Priscilla understood or not; "but I'm willing to do anything to help you, because Sally is an honest girl, and I hate to think of her being ill."

"She's kunjered, Miss Mary; dat Angie ain' got Injun blood fur nothin'; but Lor' knows I kawnt mek out what a gal teks anoder gal's beau fer, when she ain' even keerin fer him herself."

"Priscilla," said I, "that's a problem I've often heard discussed but I never expect to see solved."

"Yessum," fervently; "hit's sum-thing ter cuss over."

I laughed aloud. "That's one way of looking at it," I said.

"An' youse gwine ter hep me?"

❧ THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN ❧

"Oh, yes, if I can."

"Lor', chile, I knows you'll 'com-
plish sumthing, kase when you sets
yo' mine ter anything you don' 'low
yo'self ter be beat."

"Well, go away now and leave me
to think it over."

So Priscilla departed, and a mo-
ment after Charlie Donald sauntered
across the grass to me ; in his arms he
carried something brown and velvety
and altogether lovely.

"For you," he said, dropping it on
my knee.

"O Charlie!" I cried ; "a setter
puppy. How good of you!"

"Well, you know you wanted one."

"I did, but where did you get it?"

"Nathan Lewis, a negro whom I
helped out of trouble (drunk Saturday
night, as usual), brought it to me yes-
terday."

"Nathan Lewis ; and you say he is
under obligations to you?"

"Yes," in great surprise.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Then he will do anything for you?”

“No; that does n't follow.”

“I suppose not, but there can be no harm trying.”

“Trying what? My brain moves slowly.”

“Listen,” I said, and I hastily narrated the story wherein Nathan played the part of hero and Angie that of the villain.

“Well, upon my word,” said Charlie; “fancy any one sighing for Nathan.”

“You forget,” I replied, “‘Sally-Ann 'ain' nothin' on looks an' never' hed no luck nohow.’”

“Sally must not expect too much, you mean?”

“No, she must ‘down on her knees’ for anything that comes her way.”

“Poor Sally-Ann!”

“Poor indeed!” I replied.

“Well, look here,” said he, “I'll make a bargain with you. If you manage Angie I'll answer for Nathan.”

¶ THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN ¶

“You think you can?”

“I have great hopes.”

“Very well, I shall depend on you.”

“Good! Now suppose we talk of something else. Did you get those books I sent you?”

That evening I gave Priscilla a small vial of golden liquid (and how could she recognize Fred's favorite Chartreuse) and said impressively:

“Give this to Sally, Priscilla. Tell her to take four drops in a glass of water every night as the clock strikes twelve, and see that she says as she swallows it:

“If I drink this precious charm
Spirits cannot do me harm.”

Priscilla's eyes swelled, but she repeated slowly:

“Ef I drinks dis preshus charm
Sperrits ain' gwine ter do me harm.”

Fred joined me shortly after Priscilla had disappeared. “Mary,” said he, “you're the biggest goose living.

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

The idea of teaching that darkey all that nonsense !”

“My dear boy,” I replied; “one must fit the cure to the malady. Sally really thinks she is conjured, and if I used ordinary methods would allow her mind to influence her and ultimately fade away ; as it is, I have hopes of her recovery.”

“I expect you know,” he said. “You generally do.”

“Thanks so much. I see you are going to the quarters ; please tell Angie I want to speak to her.”

“If I remember.”

“See that you do ; this is very important.”

That his memory proved faithful was evidenced by the arrival of Angie the next day ; Angie, in a gorgeous and impossible costume of white cheese-cloth and a big hat freighted with poppies.

When this delightful vision brightened my humble apartment I said :

❧ THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN ❧

“Angie, Mrs. Doane wrote me this morning to engage you as her cook. She says she has not forgotten your batter cakes” (for Angie had cooked for us during one of Priscilla’s brief absences, and, faithless friend though she might be, was a jewel among servants). “I saw Mr. Lagroue this morning, and he said he had no objection to your going ; and I felt sure you would want to go, for the city will suit you better than the country, won’t it ?”

“Yessum, dese folkses roun’ hyar sho’ is common.”

If Angie could have guessed my uncomplimentary thoughts she would not have looked at me so smilingly ; but fortunately eyes do not speak, so she was blissfully unaware of my sentiments. “Think it over,” I said. “You will have to go before Sunday, or Mrs. Doane will give the place to some one else.”

“I’ll go, Miss Mary,” she cried ; “dere ain’ nothin’ ter keep me.”

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

“ I did n’t think so,” I replied. “ I knew you held yourself above the people on the place.” (“ Horrid little snob !” I thought.)

“ Yessum ; dere ain’ noboddy fitten ter sociate wid hyar.”

“ Then I ’ll write to Mrs. Doane to expect you ? ”

“ Yessum.”

So early Saturday morning Angie departed for “ green fields and pastures new,” and that same afternoon Charlie called to acquaint me with the success of his own machinations.

“ I sent for Nathan,” he said, “ and told him I ’d give him the place of hostler if he were only married. In fact, I ’d hold the offer open until he could find himself a wife, provided she were the right sort. I wanted her to take charge of the dairy, and would n’t tolerate any airified city negress around, but an honest, downright ugly one, the uglier the better. ‘ Priscilla Wilson’s Sally ’ud do fus rate,’ he said

¶ THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN ¶

ungallantly ; 'but Ise had oder 'tentions.'

" 'Oh, well,' said I, 'it does n't matter, but I thought you 'd jump at a place where you 'll get twelve dollars a month, besides board and a cabin. And as to Sally-Ann I've heard Miss Rasley say she was one of the best girls on their place.'

" 'That's true, Mass Charlie,' he said. 'I ain' 'sputin' what you say ; but deres dat little Angie, I 'lowed ez —'

" 'Angie,' I cried derisively, 'she would n't look at you ; besides, she's gone to New Orleans. Mr. Lagroue told me this morning he was out of a cook.'

" 'You don' sesso,' said Nathan. 'Well, bein' ez dats so, I reckon I'll go over an' see Sally.'

" 'You 'd better hurry,' I remarked, 'or the first thing you know some other fellow will cut in ahead of you.'"

"O Charlie," I cried ; "how could you?"

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Surely you know,” he replied, “that nothing stimulates the masculine ardor like the fear of a rival. Nathan was departing certain of conquest. Sally-Ann was therefore in a way valueless; by my untruthful but potent speech I have sent her stock up many points. In love and war — you know the adage. But to change the subject. I’m driving a new horse; won’t you try him with me?”

An hour or so later, as we were coming slowly home, we met Sally and Nathan walking down the big road to the quarters. Charlie checked his horse and called out:

“Well, Nathan, I hope you were successful.”

“Yessir,” he replied, grinning; “hit’s all right.”

“Miss Mary,” said Sally-Ann, coming round to my side of the cart, “I ain’ gwine ter fergit dat you cured me of bein’ kunjered. Widout you I’d hev bin pintedly dade.”

❧ THE KUNJERIN' OF SALLY-ANN ❧

"Oh, no, Sally," I protested; "you weren't as ill as all that."

"Yessum, I wuz, but I took yo' med'cin regular an' said dat potry reel keerful, an' Ise all right; but ef hit hedn' bin fur you I'd hev bin dade an' berried, an' I ain' gwine ter furgit hit neider."

"Mass Charlie," cried Nathan as we were driving off, "you wuz mistaken 'about dat oder nigger. Sally say noboddy ain' wanten to marry her ceppen me."

"Is n't that too much?" I exclaimed. "Fancy her letting him know."

Charlie looked pensively at his whip. "You would n't advise a falsehood, I'm sure!"

"Of course not," indignantly; "but there are ways of doing these things."

He laughed unrestrainedly. "Yes," he agreed; "there are certainly ways."

IX

THE MISTRESS OF OAKWOOD

MRS. DAMERON laid down her book. "It seems to me, Mary," she said, "that life grows more difficult every day; for those, I mean, who are out in the world, in the midst of the strain and stress. I regard it as an actual blessing to be allowed to vegetate and live forgotten in this far-away corner of the globe," and she smiled and looked out at the grassy yard with contented eyes.

Fred had gone to town on business and I was spending a week at Oakwood.

A great, gaunt, brick house, with many wings and numerous out-buildings, it had formerly been the show place of the parish, and even now was

❧ THE MISTRESS OF OAKWOOD ❧

stately and imposing-looking in its pathetic decay.

The conservatories were empty, the billiard rooms deserted. In the stables once famous for their thoroughbreds two lean horses ruminated over past glories, while the carriage-house sheltered a lopsided old buggy in place of the brilliant equipages that had once dazzled the parish.

But, for all that, it still kept its distinctive charm.

The war had laid a heavy hand on Oakwood; the iron grasp of military authority, from which it had never recovered.

A negro regiment had camped upon the lawns and drilled beneath the library windows; a shattered mirror in the great dining-room told the story of an officers' midnight supper, and a bullet-hole in the study wall was a mute memento of a drunken sergeant's morning call.

Many years had come and gone

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

since then, and the bitterness of internecine strife had long since passed away, but the Oakwood exchequer had never been heavy enough at any time to permit of repairs to the old home.

“But, as I was saying, Mary,” repeated Mrs. Dameron, “every life has its compensations. Now, some people would find the humdrum existence we lead here quite unbearable, but you and I never tire of it, do we?”

“No,” I replied, “but we mightn’t like it if we had never known any other.”

“That is true,” she agreed, “it makes a difference;” and she fell to dreaming of a past in which monotony had played no part.

I looked across at her — at the beautiful, aristocratic features whose charm time could never destroy — with the admiration I had always felt. Her dark-blue eyes with their jetty lashes were the eyes of a woman to whom

❧ THE MISTRESS OF OAKWOOD ❧

life had brought many experiences, and the lovely serenity of cheek and brow was that of one who had fought her battles patiently and well, with faith throughout in a merciful Providence.

I wondered what her thoughts were as she gazed absently across the yard towards the long gray line of the levee.

It was that golden hour of the afternoon when a haze lay over the gardens, when long shadows fell across the grass, and yellow butterflies idled among the roses. A faint breeze stirred the leaves and a bird's song cut the silence like a call.

Mrs. Dameron, in her white dress and black ribbons, with her air of graceful distinction and repose, looked unmistakably the great lady, the chatelaine of some handsome establishment, rather than the impoverished mistress of a half-ruined home.

The little hands lying on her knee

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

were rough and toil-stained, and the shoe showing beneath her summer gown was patched in more than one place, but the low-toned voice and exquisite smile made one forgetful of everything else.

Though I knew that for many years she had struggled daily with the weary problem of making both ends meet, I was never able to think of her without the glamouring environment of wealth and ease, the purple and fine linen to which she had been born.

Often in need herself, she was never too poor to offer shelter to some one poorer, and in consequence Oakwood House was an asylum for all the waifs and strays of the neighborhood.

It was generally some distant connection, some worn-out old man temporarily out of work, or a penniless woman face to face with starvation, not knowing where to turn. She gave them a gracious hospitality in which there was no element of charity to

❧ THE MISTRESS OF OAKWOOD ❧

hurt an easily wounded pride or sting a spirit made sensitive by misfortune.

To-day as we sat together, sometimes reading and sometimes looking up from our books to exchange a word or two, an old man in a rusty black suit and carpet slippers ambled around the corner of the house. He had a discontented face and suspicious eyes.

"Mary," said Mrs. Dameron as he came up, "this is Colonel Wilmer Graham. Cousin Wilmer, Miss Rasley. I daresay you knew her grandfather."

Colonel Wilmer Graham may at some remote period of his existence have known how to make himself agreeable, but if so he had long ago forgotten it, and I was relieved when after a few grumbling sentences he disappeared into the hall.

Mrs. Dameron smiled across at me.

"He is very old, Mary."

I did not answer.

"And very helpless."

Still I did not speak, for his un-

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

gracious acceptance of her kindness had angered me.

"There is nothing," she went on, "that appeals to me more than old age, especially incompetent, dependent old age; it is infinitely pathetic."

"He might have been more courteous," I said.

"Of course, but he has had a great deal of trouble and we must make allowances. It is hard to do so when we are young, I know; for I was as intolerant as you are once, Mary, but I have grown wiser with age."

"I think you were always good," I exclaimed.

"You are an excellent tonic," she laughed back; "if I listened to you I should end by having a very fine opinion of myself."

A big white hen and her noisy brood strolled across the grass, interrupting our conversation. I looked at them enviously. "You have such luck," I sighed. "Priscilla's last set-

❧ THE MISTRESS OF OAKWOOD ❧

ting was a perfect failure, and I know the eggs were good, for I bought them myself from Madame Jean Philippe."

"Did you hear her granddaughter had returned?"

"No, but I am very glad."

"I heard she did not intend to receive her, but I suppose the ties of blood were too strong. This is a pitiful world, Mary."

"Miss Marg'ret," said old Sukey's voice behind us, "big Mary's Betsey say pleas'm step down an' tek a look at her baby; she feared he gwine ter die."

Mrs. Dameron rose instantly. "Get the paregoric and peppermint out of the medicine chest, Sukey," she ordered. "I'll be back in a few minutes, Mary; I suppose you can amuse yourself while I am away."

For a time I lay back in the big rocking-chair on the gallery, content to be alone and watch the passers-by on the road beyond.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

They were few and far between ; now it was an old negro jogging past on a rusty mule, now a tip-tilted baker's cart, its faded gray sides showing over the top of the Cherokee hedge. Once Dr. Starr's new buggy flashed past, followed by the Pattonville stage with its tired horses and dusty passengers.

A red-sailed oyster lugger drifted dreamily down the bayou, and a swift moving steamboat sent the waves tossing over the top of the levee.

I got up and went inside, for the high-water situation was too much for my nerves.

After lingering awhile in the sweet-scented old hall I wandered into the drawing-room. As I entered the door the picture between the windows seemed to spring from its frame to greet me.

It was of a young girl in the riding dress of the day, with her whip in her hand, her dog at her feet, but so spirited, so lifelike in the perfection of

❧ THE MISTRESS OF OAKWOOD ❧

its coloring, that it was difficult to believe it a mere portrait. On the opposite wall was its match, the picture of a young man in the uniform of a Confederate captain. Both paintings were the work of an artist, and were distinguished by their singular look of radiant youth.

I glanced from one to the other, scarcely knowing which delighted me most; the boyish husband who had laid down his life at Winchester, or the young wife looking with untroubled eyes upon a world that had brought her so much sorrow.

“Mary,” called Mrs. Dameron from the hall, “where are you? Dreaming dreams in the twilight? Bring us some lights, Sukey.”

“Was the baby really ill?” I asked.

“Oh, no, the usual thing — imprudent eating. They have no judgment — no sense. In some respects slavery was better for them, they are nothing but children, — ignorant, helpless

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

children, — after all !” Her voice sounded tired.

“ Dear Mrs. Dameron,” I cried ; “ will you give me this portrait of yourself some day ? I would not ask it if there were any one else.”

To my surprise her eyes shone with intense gratitude. “ How like you !” she said ; “ you have guessed my trouble. How I dread to die and leave nobody to care what becomes of those poor bits of canvas ! Sometimes, Mary, I have thought of burning them, of cutting them to strips with my own hands, rather than leave them to be a tax and worry to indifferent connections. I was in a shop once in New Orleans and saw a great heap of portraits, the De Folin family’s, piled against the wall and covered over with dust and mold and cobwebs. It distressed me beyond expression and broke my heart to think that some day that might be our fate.”

“ Give them both to me,” I cried ;

❧ THE MISTRESS OF OAKWOOD ❧

“and I will take such care of them !
You are not afraid to trust me, are
you ?”

“Need you ask ?” she said, stooping
to give me one of her rare kisses.
“And now let us have some music
while Sukey is preparing tea.”

“Sing to me,” I pleaded ; “I am so
tired of my own songs.”

“As you wish,” and she seated her-
self at the piano and ran her fingers
over the keys. Song after song floated
through the great room, old-fashioned
melodies whose yellowed sheets I had
seen in my mother’s portfolio. Then
after a momentary pause she began
again :

“Forget ? Ah, no, no boon ’t would be
To seal the lips of Memory,
To quaff the Lethean draught and glide
Down cold oblivion’s icy tide.

“Amidst the world’s despair and strife
We learn the bitterness of life.
We miss the sunshine, lose the flowers,
But oh, the past is always ours !

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“The happy past when hearts were young,
When love came tripping from the tongue,
When Hope low breathed of joys to be —

Forget? Nay, life is Memory!”

Her voice died away; the low, lovely voice, full of tenderness and sympathy.

I sat at the window, gazing into the gathering twilight. When she finished I did not even turn around to thank her — there was no necessity, — she understood.

I was thinking of her life, of the youth that had begun so brilliantly, and I found myself wondering what my own story would be twenty years from then. Would I too —

“Mary,” laughed a soft voice at my side; “wake up! Old Sukey has called us twice to tea, and here is Cousin Wilmer.”

X

WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP

I TRIED vainly to hold my thoughts together; in spite of myself they wandered to the levee, where Fred and Charlie Donald and old Colonel Lossing, assisted by all the able-bodied men of the neighborhood, were fighting what seemed to be a hopeless fight against the water.

An hour ago, as I drove past, I stopped a moment to watch the men striving with logs and timber outworks and bags of earth to keep out the enemy.

Then behind Uncle Ephr'um's broad back I had shed a quiet tear or two all to myself.

Fred, catching sight of me, waved his hat from the pile of lumber where he stood, and Charlie came running

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

down to the carriage to ask me to pray my hardest that the levee would hold, and I had tried hard to make some gay response and had failed signally.

Now as I sat in a corner of the big pew I was paying but slight heed to the service. Mr. Pyrl's earnest voice, the choir's musical grotesqueries, the snores of old Mr. Gaston in the pew behind me formed part of a drowsy whole of which I was conscious but unheeding.

Through the open windows came the odor of new-cut grass and the heavy perfume of lilies. The rectory yard rioted with blooms, and a great bumble-bee, drunk with the sweetness of blush-roses, wandered aimlessly into the church to delight the children by his waverings.

Mr. Pyrl's old cook sat on the rectory gallery shelling peas; she was humming to herself in decorous undertones, her head nodding as she worked.

A dominicker chicken with yellow

¶ WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP ¶

legs and featherless wings came cautiously up the steps. He paused with his head on one side, his eye shining brightly, to reflect upon the situation. Old Lisa, overcome by religious fervor, closed her eyes as she swayed back and forth.

The chicken, encouraged by her indifference, drew a step nearer, and after a moment's indecision sprang boldly upon the pan. There was a crash — a smothered scream, the pan went one way, the chicken the other, while Lisa, thus rudely recalled to things mundane, surveyed the ruin with darkly brooding eyes.

I brought my reluctant gaze indoors to meet Mrs. Dameron's smile; she too had been looking out. Mr. Pyrl, blissfully unconscious of our backslidings, gave out the hymn.

We rose resignedly and the choir fell manfully to work.

The second verse was trailing its mournful length along when the

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church-door opened. There was a rustle of silken skirts, a faint odor of violets, and Mrs. Keith Ewing drifted languidly down the aisle to her pew.

The congregation, fast becoming somnolent, roused to new life. Gowns like Mrs. Ewing's were not often seen in Vieuxtemps church.

Old Mrs. Grant bent her beribboned bonnet into the next pew. "When did she come?" she asked in a loud stage aside.

"Last night," replied her neighbor in the same wheezy whisper; "high-water brought them,—her and her husband."

I listened interestedly, for the Ewings were our near neighbors. They were rarely at home, however, spending most of their time in town, where they found amusements more congenial than the country could provide.

Not yet twenty-five, married to a man several years her senior, mistress of a handsome home, and one of the

¶ WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP ¶

petted leaders of an eminently exclusive society, there were many who found it in their hearts to envy Mrs. Ewing, but I, who had accidentally stumbled on the inside history of her marriage, was not one of them.

We had been good friends and constantly together when I too "dwelt in Babylon," but of late years we had drifted somewhat apart. Not that we cared the less, but circumstances had prevented our meeting and diverse interests had allowed us to idly acquiesce in the separation.

But I felt an interest in her always, often wondering what would be the outcome of her hasty marriage, made in pique and without affection.

Gratified ambition and social victories might content some women, but I knew Agnes Ewing too well to believe that they would satisfy her. The restless, ardent nature, which masked itself under a careless worldliness that deceived many, demanded

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[more of life than the empty triumphs that fill the cup of some.

To-day as I glanced at her dark head bent reverently over her clasped hands I would have given much to have known the tenor of her prayer.

The sermon began, a genuine, old-fashioned appeal to Christians; not a theological discourse glittering with epigrams and meaningless phrases.

I listened intently, ashamed of my former inattention; Mr. Gaston's snores ceased, Mrs. Dameron's eyes deepened sympathetically, and Agnes Ewing's lovely face lost its accustomed look of patient boredom.

“Make the most of your opportunities,” concluded the rector; “life is full of disappointments and heart-aches, but are we not often responsible for them? Do we not make our own tragedies? If we were more patient, if we would eliminate self and recall that love ‘suffereth all things, endureth all things, hopeth all things,’ and would

¶ WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP ¶

put aside the petty vanity and foolish pride that hamper our best efforts and strive each in his own way to bring some sunshine into the lives of others, there would be fewer moments of despondency and despair.

“‘She loveth much,’ saith the Master. Ah, my brethren, shall we not so live that at the last, when we come to lay our burdens down, it will be remembered of us, not our shortcomings, not our sins, not our many faults and omissions, but that we loved much?’”

Simple words enough, and not even marked by originality, but spoken so earnestly and with such evident conviction that no one could listen unmoved.

When we streamed out into the sunshine, momentarily subdued and thoughtful, Mrs. Ewing joined me.

“Have pity on me,” she said when having exchanged greetings we were about to part, “ask me up to dinner

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

with you. Keith told me not to expect him, and it is horribly lonely in that big old house."

"Come, by all means," I said; "this is Priscilla's evening out, and we may dine on bread and water, but you are very welcome."

"I know Priscilla of old," she said, sweeping her silken skirts into the old barouche. "You cannot frighten me off."

"I suppose the high water brought you down," I said as we jogged along; "that's the first good thing it has accomplished."

"What a pretty speech, Mary," she said; "and, would you believe it, I'm just trusting enough to think you mean it."

"Because you know how foolishly weak I am about you."

"Not foolishly, but sensibly, prudently so," she laughed.

"Tell me something of yourself," I went on, turning to look into eyes that

¶ WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP ¶

seemed to me to have grown darker and deeper. "Is much going on in town?"

"Mercifully no."

"So you had time to remember us?"

"I always remember you; indeed, I don't think you realize how much I miss you. You were such a comfort, Mary; you always saw the same amusing things I saw. I would have loved you for that alone, and now there is nobody."

"How about Mrs. Kinzel? I hear you are very intimate."

"A friendship *de convenance*," she said. "At first she was bearable, but lately, since she has begun to be taken up and invited around, she has become quite impossible."

"She owes it all to you," I remarked.

"O my dear, she has already forgotten that."

"I never liked her. Ah," looking towards the levee, "there they are;

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that's Mr. Donald in gray and Fred in the dark-blue shirt. Does n't look much like a cotillion leader, does he?"

"Do you see my husband?"

"No; I suppose he's up above somewhere. I'm going to stop and ask the latest news." A little creole came down, lifting his hat as we drew up.

"Any change?" I asked, as one would inquire about an invalid.

"Not much, madame; we found a weak spot at Grasslands, but we patched it up before it did any great harm."

"How will it all end?"

He shrugged his shoulders: "It must break somewhere," he said.

Priscilla's dinner was everything to be desired, but Agnes and I did scant justice to it, our informant's parting words having taken the savor out of life.

Whose place would go? Would the break be on this side of the bayou, or would a merciful Providence ordain that it occur on the other bank?

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And when would it be? To-night, this afternoon, to-morrow?

“Come into the garden,” I said, “you’re not eating a mouthful and neither am I.”

“It is not your fault,” said Agnes to Priscilla, who had witnessed our neglect of her viands with rising anger; “nothing could have been nicer.”

“’Tain’ no use ter cook dese days,” she grumbled, “Mass’ Fred don’ eat enuff ter keep a bird alive an’ Miss Mary ain much better.”

“We’ve been on a dreadful strain here,” I explained. “Of course it is worse for Fred —”

“No it is n’t,” broke in Agnes, “there is something he can do; he does n’t have to sit with folded hands and wait. That is the horror of being a woman — the waiting. Oh, Mary, how sweet the old garden is, — not a thing changed.”

“No. Kate says she believes if she came back a hundred years from now

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

she would find the same mocking-birds and butterflies and roses she had left behind."

"I saw Kate yesterday. She sent you her best love. Your brother is a fortunate fellow."

"Yes, I think so. I am very fond of her. I know they will be happy."

"Oh, as to that!" she shrugged her shoulders.

"Cynicism," I cried, "on such a lovely day."

"I'm no cynic," she retorted, "I wish I were. I'm a poor fool crying for the moon; whose bitterness against the hopelessness of life finds expression in words. Your real cynic never rants; he accepts everything as a matter of course. It is the idealist who cries out, the dreamer who is always hoping against hope. The people who begin by demanding much of life are those that end by expecting nothing."

"Do you demand much?" I asked.

"I am a woman," she said.

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I laughed. "How very oracular."

"Or comprehensive," she corrected. "By the way, I have n't offered you my good wishes yet; I have never met Mr. Delancey, but I hear he is altogether desirable and I feel sure —"

"Don't!" I cried, breaking in on the smoothly turned phrases, "you don't mean a word of all that. You are thinking at this very moment how foolish I am to be so happy; that it is not going to last, and that I shall some day come to the end of my dream."

"Yes," she said, "I was."

"But I will not, Agnes; it will be the same fifty years from now."

"We all think that. But how strange you should guess my thoughts; you are very clever."

"Not at all, but I know you."

"Well that is more than I do myself."

"You said you were crying for the moon, so I infer you are dissatisfied."

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“ Oh, wise young judge ! ” she mocked.

“ And knowing also your intensity of purpose, and your capacity for getting what you want, I go a step farther and conclude that the particular moon in question is something forbidden to you.”

She laughed, but rather sadly.

“ ‘Forbidden’ sounds so Frenchy, Mary. It’s nothing I should n’t have, but something I want very badly, and threw away with my own hands.”

I stared at her in silence ; what could she refer to but the old love affair that I hoped she had forgotten.

“ Why, how pale you are,” she cried, “ have I said anything — ”

“ No, nothing,” I answered hastily.

“ I’m afraid you had some complimentary thought about me, Mary ; you looked positively frightened. Don’t worry. I’ll never do anything out of the way, even supposing that I wanted to. I’m like the old lady

¶ WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP ¶

in the play who said she was too proud to do wrong. It's a good thing, pride, in its way."

"You could n't have listened to the sermon," I said, "and you looked so attentive ; what a fraud you are, after all."

"I did n't miss a word ; he preached on love. I thought it an odd theme for a little, lonely, gray-haired bachelor. I wondered if he had ever had an affair in his life."

I tried to look unconcerned, but was miserably conscious of my rising color and the amused expression in Agnes' dark eyes.

"So," she said, after a moment's observation, "that is how you employ your time. No wonder you are not bored out here. 'You thought to break a country heart,' etc. Fie, Mary, I thought better things of you."

Before I could reply, Joe came dashing across the yard, crying at the top of his voice, "She done bruk ! de levee

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done bus ! Glory, glory, de bank done gone."

Agnes and I were on our feet in an instant. "Where?" I cried frantically, "where? Don't you hear me, you wretched little boy? On what place?"

But he was gone without answering, back to the levee, whither Agnes and I hastened to follow him. We fairly flew over the grass, with utter disregard for our skirts; now stumbling over a root, now stopping a moment to catch a hurried breath. Agnes went so much faster than I that I stared at her in amazement.

"Why should you care so much?" I panted, "even if your place goes, — it is — not — your all!"

"Keith would care so," she answered, "he never says a great deal; that is not his way; but his heart is wrapped up in the 'Cedars.'"

A light began to break upon me; the unexpected had happened; far from

¶ WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP ¶

regretting the old affair she had fallen in love with her own husband. The moon she was crying for was his affection.

My thoughts came disconnectedly as I raced along, but of one thing I felt sure ; if Keith Ewing knew the truth, her happiness would not be long in coming.

He had been very much in love with her at the time of their marriage, and while her indifference might have done much to chill a younger man, I knew an affection like his was not easily outlived.

The front gate fortunately happened to be open, and we dashed through it and up the levee without ceremony.

“Where is everybody ?” I cried, surprised by the semi-deserted appearance of things. “Fred ! Charlie ! somebody, come here !”

“Look !” cried Agnes, grasping at my arm and speaking in a strained,

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

unnatural voice, "yonder — across the bayou — the bank is gone!"

It was indeed true. Southmeade, Grasslands, Oakwood, the "Cedars" were safe; the crevasse was opposite.

I felt ashamed of my sudden rush of relieved joy.

"Those poor people," I murmured contritely, staring at the broken banks, the rushing water, the desolate, miserable scene with sympathetic eyes.

"Pitiful, isn't it?" said a man's voice at my elbow, "one man's meat is another man's poison."

"Oh, Mr. Ewing," I cried, "was it not very unexpected?"

"Yes, we thought the break would be at my place. I had just ordered the men to a place of safety when there was a loud report, like a cannon shot, and we saw the whole bank opposite part in two and slide down into the bayou. It was a horrible sight, yet I can't pretend to be sorry. It saved our place."



*“Look — the bank is
gone!”*

¶ WHEN THE WATERS CAME UP ¶

“Can it be closed?” I asked, conscious of the guilty hope that it could not be.

“Hardly; not at this stage of the water anyhow. We are going over there now to see what we can do. They were taken by surprise, for they thought their levee comparatively safe; crayfish holes, I suppose. Your brother and young Donald have already gone, and I only waited to see you two and relieve your minds.”

“That was very kind of you. We have been dreadfully anxious. Agnes has been positively wretched.”

“Agnes?” surprisedly. “Why — my — why — Agnes, what is it?” for the tears were streaming down her face, and she was trembling from head to foot.

“It is the relief,” she stammered. “I was frightened to death; I thought it was the ‘Cedars,’ and I knew how much you loved it — what it would mean to you.”

“You care?” he began.

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

But I had strolled out of hearing, apparently absorbed in the dreary scene opposite.

That night, however, after a merry supper, — the reactionary result of days of suspense — when the men were lingering over their cigars and Agnes and I were alone, she laid her cheek against mine with the grace that characterized her, and whispered : “ You said I usually got what I wanted, didn’t you ? Well you were right, Mary, you always are. The moon is mine ! ”

XI

MA' JANE'S WEDDIN'

AS I came out of the plantation dairy, with Joe following in my wake, I met "ole Simon's Marthy," an old woman somewhere on the shady side of seventy years ; always grotesque looking, owing to her singular combination of garments, which were never by any chance of the same hue, she was more noticeable than usual to-day, because of the settled gloom that had possession of her features.

"Mornin', Miss Mary," she said with a deep curtsey, "you sho' is a good sight fur ole eyes."

Now I had known my visitor for many years, and long experience had taught me that a conversation begun in this flowery fashion eventually closed with an appeal for assistance.

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

“You haven’t been to see me for an age,” I said, seating myself on a stump. (“Joe, take that pitcher to the kitchen.”) How have you been?”

“Poly, tank the Lord! Poly, Miss Mary.”

“You look as though something had worried you.”

“Yessum, Ise been thru deep waters; my gran’ darter, Ma’ Jane Vincent, wuz married larst night: yessum, married ole Sam Farber’s son, Jack, him what’s carpenter on de Harrell place.”

“Why that’s a very good match,” I said. “Mary Jane, if I remember, is quite a pretty girl.”

“Yessum, an’ a good gal what allus mines her own bizness an’ ain’ sputin wid noboddy, an’ ’t ain’ her fault she dun hed de trubble she hed larst night.”

“What happened?” I asked sympathetically.

“Why, you knows, Miss Mary, ever sence wese bin moved ter town, dose

¶ MA' JANE'S WEDDIN' ¶

low down niggers on toder side of de canals bin mad wid us, kase we don' wantter 'sociate wid 'em; Ise been useter quality folkses an' house niggers, an' hit sho duz go 'ginst me ter put up wid dem town trash what ain' got de manners dey wuz born wid."

"It's a pity you did n't stay on the plantation," I said; for I knew she had only moved away because her grandchildren thought they would be more "free" living in the village than in one of our cabins.

"Well, Miss Mary," she said, "deres no countin' fur tases; an' de chillun wuz so sot on movin', I jes' hed ter give in; but I reckon ef dey knowed what wuz gwine ter happen at Ma' Jane's weddin', dey'd hev been satisfied whar dey wuz."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"Yessum, dat's jes what I'm gwine ter do, kase I knows you hez a kine hyart an' feels sorry fur de pore an' depressed.

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

“ Well, larst night we ’d laid off ter hev Ma’ Jane’s weddin’, an’ seein’ ez we spressly wanted ter hev hit ’slect, we jes axed ’bout a dozen folkse ter cum ter us house an’ sist. De rooms wuz lookin’ reel party-like wid candles settin’ ’roun’ in bottles, an’ we sho did hev a fine supper; roas’ pig an’ taters an’ clabber an’ corn-bread an’ a big cake in de middle of de table what Miss Sally Harrell sont us; an’ Simon an’ me ’greed ez nobody cud n’t hev things nicer ’n we hed ’em.” She paused and a look of intense regret swept over her face.

“ Well, Miss Mary, you may n’ bleeve hit, but jes arfter de cerri-munny, when Brer Hicks hed say ter Ma’ Jane an’ Jack ‘ I pernounces you man an’ wife,’ we heerd de mos’ scandellous gwineson in de street outside; yellin’ an’ cussin’ an’ sech langwidge ez ud tun yo’ hyar gray; an’ de do’ done bus open an’ bout twenty

¶ MA' JANE'S WEDDIN' ¶

of dem no count town niggers cum prancin' in.

"Miss Mary, I wuz dat flammergasted I liketer swooned. Brer Hicks he 'vance an' say, sez he, 'Bredderin an' Sistren, dis is mos' onchrisshen gwine-son, an' I vises yo ter lebe dese premises, kase sein' ez you warnt 'vited you ain' got no call ter stay.'

"Den dat big black nigger Jeems Andrews ups an' sez, 'Brer Hicks, you keep yo' jawin' fur Sundays; dese hyar folkses puts on airs an' sidders deyselves bettern we all, an' we ain' gwine ter stan' hit.' An' wid dat, Miss Mary, chile, fo' you kud say Jim Robinson dey dun clar'd off every blessed thing on de table — pig an' clabber an' 'lasses an' taters an' cake; dey all went jis like a swarm of bees dun bin at 'em."

"That was outrageous," I cried indignantly. "Why did n't you send for the constable?"

"I'm cumin' ter dat, Miss Mary. Well, dey wuz dat contrarifyin' an' dat

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

'sultin' dat Ma' Jane an' wealls frens 'cluded ter git out an' leve dem varmints ter ac ez dey choosed, but jes ez we wuz slippin' out, Jeems Andrews hed de insurance ter 'pose a toas' ter de bride, an' Simon wuz dat sulted he let out wid he right arm an' knockt him flat on he back."

"Good!" I said warmly.

"No'm, bad!" replied old Marthy, "kase jes at dat minnit de constubble, tracted by de yellin', cum a-runnin' an' 'rested de whole lot, my ole man same ez de oders.

"We tried ter splain, but twarnt no good, an' dey done tuk him ter jail, an' dar he's bleegeed ter stay twell we kin git de money ter bail him out. Now you knows, Miss Mary, dat wuz hard on us ter hev so much trubble fur nothin', an' Ma' Jane's so shame' she don' do nothin' but cry."

I had long since guessed that old Marthy's visit was not due solely to my personal attractions, but in this instance

❧ MA' JANE'S WEDDIN' ❧

I felt such genuine sympathy for the afflicted family, whose only crime was a desire to be "'slect," that I was more than willing to help them.

I was about to ask the amount necessary to restore Simon to his family, when Fred rode up, and, upon learning the situation, volunteered to go over at once and straighten matters out.

Marthy departed with voluble protestations of gratitude and affection, but of course I knew I would not see her again until the Gage family were once more in difficulties.

A day or two later, as I looked out of the library window I saw a wagon loaded with household belongings (the red tester shining in the sun) moving slowly down the big road to the "Quarters."

"Who is that moving on the place?" I asked Fred.

"Old Simon's crowd," he laughed. "Their brief experience of town life

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

has more than satisfied them, and, like many other seekers after metropolitan pleasures, they have decided that after all the country is not to be despised. Hereafter they will content themselves with such humdrum pursuits as Southmeade can afford them."

That night, when I was giving out breakfast, Priscilla remarked to me, apropos of the prodigals' return:

"Hit's a good thing ter know when youse well off, ain' hit, Miss Mary?"

XII

THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH

THE Donald plantation adjoined ours, and as Charlie and I had been friends since our mud-pie days, there was nothing unusual in my escorting him out to look at Elijah.

“You must say something very nice about him,” I said, as we crossed the yard, Charlie’s enthusiasm not being his strong point.

In this instance, however, he proved satisfactory, saying almost as much as even I could wish.

“But why call him Elijah?” he asked.

“Because that’s his name,” I replied.

A silence fell, punctuated by the grunts of the small black and white pig beside whose pen we stood.

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

“ I fail to see the connection,” pursued my visitor. “ Elijah was a prophet.”

“ And I trust this Elijah will prove a profit to me,” I said flippantly.

The glance Charlie sent me was half scorn and half compassion. “ And was that the reason — ” he began.

“ No, no ! ” I cried, ashamed of my wretched attempt at a pun. “ He ’s named after old Uncle ’Lijah Byrum, who gave him to me.”

“ Upon what occasion ? ”

“ I begged Fred to bail him out of jail Saturday, and the next day he appeared with his namesake.”

“ Bread cast upon the waters.”

“ Peculiar-looking bread,” I observed.

“ Well, now he ’s here, what do you mean to do with him ? ”

“ Keep him, of course.”

“ You ’d better send him back to the ‘ Quarters.’ ”

“ And lose him among all those plantation pigs ? No, thank you.”

“ I ’ve heard you discourse for hours

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

upon the commonness of keeping pigs around a yard."

"I was referring to other people's," I answered shamelessly; "but anyhow, this is different. Elijah will stay in his pen; and, way off here, where's the harm?"

"There's the principle of the thing."

"Oh, bother!"

"He will be stolen."

"Hardly."

"And he'll get out and root up your rose-bushes and Uncle Ephr'um's vegetables, and he will feast upon your young chickens, and altogether carry death and devastation in his path."

"What a pessimist you are," I remarked, leading the way to the garden. "Now I predict very different things for him. He will be fed on butter-milk and sweet potatoes. He will wax strong and portly, and the fame of him will go the country round, until all the butchers in the parish will crave on bended knees the privilege of owning

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

him. Then I shall sell him, and my purse will grow so heavy that I shall stand in great danger of being married for my fortune."

Charlie laughed. "O golden dream!" he cried, opening the garden gate. "And what will you do with the money, even granting that you make any? Squander it on a bonnet?"

"A bonnet, in this benighted neighborhood!"

"We may be benighted," said Charlie, "but we don't go bareheaded."

"You don't wear fifteen-dollar hats," I answered.

By now we had reached the grass plot in the centre of the garden encircled by slim mimosas, with the great sweet-olive tree in the middle.

Uncle Ephr'um was at work in the soft spring sunshine, spading rose-bushes.

Uncle Ephr'um and I, during our long acquaintance (dating back to my babyhood), had had many fierce differ-

¶ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ¶

ences of opinion ; sometimes the victory was mine, again he came off with banners flying, but there was one subject upon which we perfectly agreed, and that was the garden.

My fancy for untrained vines and climbing roses ; for old-fashioned, sweet-scented plants and flowering shrubs that my grandmother had loved before me ; for nature unconfinèd — permitted to follow her own glad will — met with his delighted approval.

In consequence the acre of ground allotted to us by long custom was a riot of sweetness and color.

He was never too busy to help me with my flowers, and would drop any other duty to transplant a rose or set out violets ; to prune the branches of encroaching trees or discuss with me the advisability of thinning out the cannas or leaving them to luxuriate unmolested.

We would go into mutual raptures

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

over the progress of our rose cuttings, and one bright spring morning I remember being awakened by a knock at my window, to find Uncle Ephr'um standing outside with the news that the first syringa bud had opened!

To-day he met me with pleasant tidings.

"Miss Mary, chile," he said, after greeting Charlie, "dat Lamarque rose of yo' granma's done put out a shoot."

"O, Uncle Ephr'um!" I cried, "and we thought it was dead."

"You thought so," he corrected. "I lowed ez dere wuz life in dat ole root fur years ter cum!"

"So you did," I agreed. "I was the unbeliever."

"Lor', Mass' Charlie," he went on, stooping to scrape the earth from his spade, "you sho' is lookin' well."

Now, as Charlie was just recovering from a severe attack of the grippe, this was prophesying smooth things indeed.

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

My companion laughed and slipped his hand into his pocket. "That's certainly worth a quarter," he said, handing over the expected response.

"Sit here," I said, motioning him towards a bench. "Were there ever" — gazing dreamily upward — "skies bluer than those we have at South-meade?"

"From pigs to poesy!" he murmured admiringly. "The versatility of the feminine mind is past conception."

"Do you know," I went on unheeding, "that in that crêpe-myrtle tree yonder a mocking-bird has built her nest for three seasons? See — there she goes now with a worm as big as a match."

"Nasty things, worms," said Charlie.

"Miss Mary," broke in Uncle Ephr'um, "I wuz perusin' 'roun' in de vegitubble gyardeen dis mornin' an' I cum right up on a passel of dem yearlin' nigger boys from de 'Quar-

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

ters,' an' when I tole 'em ter leave dey jes laffed at me mos' outdacious like; so I ain' sayin' nothin' but I went inside an' got Mr. Fred's big pistol; den I cum back an' s' I, 'Now ef you don' git some partiality on yo'selfs an' git out you sho'll be sorry;' an', chile, you ot ter 've seen 'em clippin'!"

"Have you got any partiality on yourself, Mary?" asked Charlie.

"Uncle Ephr'um's vocabulary is peculiarly his own," I replied. "By the way, did you know he was in great trouble? His son Shadrack has gone to be a soldier."

"Yessir" (from Uncle Ephr'um), "listed ter fight dem no count Spaniels."

"Oh, I expect he'll come back!" said Charlie, with as much gravity as he could assume.

"I hopes so, Mass' Charlie, I sholy hopes so; kase I'm gittin' too ole an' too poly ter tek keer of dat wife an' dem seven chillun of his'n. Yessir,

¶ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ¶

seven head of chillun an' de oldes' ain' much mo'n a baby."

"Family affection is a beautiful thing," said Charlie.

"Uncle Ephr'um's bark is worse than his bite," I responded.

The next moment, however, I repented my ill-timed defence, for Uncle Ephr'um, noting the lowered tones and confidential manner, thought himself in the neighborhood of "an affair" (not having been told of my engagement yet), and with that love of a romance which is inborn in the Southern negro directed a glance of understanding and approval towards us.

"Mass' Charlie," he said, leaning on his spade and surveying us with great interest, "ain' you powerful lonely up in dat big house of yourn?"

"That I am," replied Charlie, with a wicked delight in the situation.

"Den you ot ter marry," was the reply. "You ain' got no bizness ter be

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

wastin' yo' time in singularity like youse bin doin' all dese years."

"The singularity is," said Charlie, "that I can't get anybody to have me, that is, anybody I'd like to have."

"Fur de lan's sake," cried Uncle Ephr'um, "how you do run on. You knows enny right-thinkin' gal ud marry you, wid dat big house of yourn an' all dat money (for there is a rooted impression among the old servants which no outward proofs can eradicate that we are still wealthy). Looks ain' everything, Mass' Charlie," he pursued. "Now I lows ef you wuz ter ask —"

"There's a carriage coming in at the front gate," I cried. "Can you make out whose it is?"

Charlie shaded his eyes with his hand.

"If it's the Bruness," I went on, "I'm not going in. I really could n't stand two hours of mortal dulness."

"Let's take to the woods," cried my visitor, who had often fled with me to avoid unwelcome callers.

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

“No, no,” I answered, “it’s dear old Colonel Lossing. You unscrupulous boy, you knew it was he. I wouldn’t run from him for anything!” And I started towards the house while he went round to the stables for his horse.

As I reached the steps, Colonel Lossing’s high “jumper” and absurdly small creole mare had just drawn up before them. As usual, he was accompanied by a dissipated-looking little yellow dog, to whom Flip gave instant battle.

It was amidst a chorus of snarls and barks that the Colonel alighted and bent over my hand with the courtly grace of a forgotten day.

He was a handsome old man, with clear, kindly blue eyes, and a serene expression that to those who knew his history was incomprehensible.

His hat was a relic, his clothes threadbare, yet it would have taken a dull intellect to believe him anything but a gentleman.

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

To Joe, who came around the house, he confided the dusty "jumper" and dingy little mare, with instructions for their care as minute as those he would have given once about the matchless thoroughbreds of other days.

Fred came out to welcome him, and he was soon seated in the easiest rocker, with a glass of iced lemonade and a plate of Priscilla's best cakes at his elbow.

"Dear, dear," he said, looking at me with the sweetest, most grateful smile, "you put yourself out entirely too much for an old fellow like me. You'll spoil me, Mary. I'm not used to such luxury."

Not used! I wondered if Fred's mind harked back as rapidly as mine did to the stories told us by Mammy Margaret of the wonderful doings at "Woodleigh," in the prosperous days before the war.

"It is a pleasure, Colonel," I said, so earnestly that the commonplace lost

¶ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ¶

its insincerity, "and you give us the opportunity too rarely."

"Well, my child," he replied, "I'm right busy nowadays, and it's only now and then I can get off. How like your mother you are, Mary, the same brow and eyes!" and he fell into a reverie, from which Fred and I did not attempt to arouse him.

We too were lost in thought of the brave, generous, old man, whose misfortunes, brought about by the treachery of trusted friends, had never embittered him; who had seen home and fortune go, — the great plantation, the savings of a lifetime, everything save a tiny cabin that had once been his gift to a slave; who now, in his old age, kept the books of a country store rather than be (as he expressed it) a burden to his friends; who never murmured against fortune nor railed against fate; and who by his cheerfulness and patience was an example to all who knew him.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

Through every reverse he had kept his buoyant spirit and unshaken confidence in the goodness of human nature, though how he had managed to do so was quite past my comprehension ; but that he had done so was doubtless the secret of his own happiness and the love of his friends.

“Forgive me, Mary,” he said suddenly, “but you are yourself responsible for my absent-mindedness. You should not suggest ‘the days that are no more.’”

Then he fell to chatting with my brother, while I sat by a delighted listener. His familiarity with all that was going on in the world outside was wonderful, and it was evident that his interest in life was as keen as it had always been.

I listened in admiration and amazement. Accustomed as I had been to the hurrying existence of a town, where people grow old young, and where a too great variety of interests weakens

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

the vitality and dulls the capacity for enjoyment, the enthusiasm of this old man, who had drunk deep of the cup of experience, was a revelation.

His keen pity and love for his kind touched me as nothing has ever touched me before or since. I had been reared in a different school, a school where life made people cynical instead of compassionate, and where the gracious doctrine of turning the other cheek was never practised and almost unknown.

“ You say you have him with you ? ” asked Fred’s surprised voice, recalling my wandering thoughts.

“ Yes, my boy, he was so utterly out at elbows ; so at the end of his tether, one might say, and without a friend in the world to turn to, that I really did n’t see how I could do anything else.”

“ No ? Well, I think others might. George Dabney was your evil genius, Colonel.”

“ Who knows, Fred, he might have

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

been led astray ? It's very difficult to judge of people unless we know the motives that prompt their actions. I don't deny that he disappointed me ; but his worst enemy would pity him now, and God knows I am not that ! ”

“ I suppose he's been drinking ? ” went on the clear, merciless young voice.

“ He says he's just up from an attack of malaria,” answered the Colonel.

“ And you actually have him living with you — under your roof — eating at your table ! I don't see how he can look you in the face, much less accept your charity.”

The Colonel was silent ; Fred's indignation on his behalf pained rather than pleased him. Then he said in a tone of apology :

“ He's very old, my boy.”

“ Years younger than you are, Colonel.”

“ And a nervous wreck besides. Now I don't feel a day older than I

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

did ten years ago. I sleep like a child, and my appetite" — smiling towards the empty cake plate — "I need not tell you how good it is!"

Fred fidgeted in his chair; the Colonel's excessive charity fretted him. After a moment he got up and went inside.

The old man chatted on, about his dog and his little mare "Ginger," and his garden filled with roses from cuttings I had given him; and I told him about the books I had been reading, and the exceeding stupidity of my young turkeys, and last but by no means least — about Elijah.

His respectful interest was inspiring; I contrasted it resentfully with Charlie's mocking attitude.

The Colonel felt sure that Elijah would bring a good price. "And may I make bold to ask what you mean to do with the money?" he ventured.

I looked over my shoulder. Fred was nowhere to be seen.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“It is a great secret,” I said, in a half whisper; “but Fred (you know how fond he is of birds) has been perfectly wild for a set of Audubon’s for a long time, and I want to make the money myself and get them for him.”

The Colonel’s face fell.

“They are very costly, Mary.”

“I know; but I thought I might get a broken set, or some that were not in perfect condition.”

His eyes lit up.

“My dear child, I have it—the very thing. George Dabney was telling me, just the other day, that he had a broken set of Audubon’s packed away somewhere, and he asked me if I thought I could dispose of them.”

“Why, Colonel!” I exclaimed, “that seems almost too good to be true. Would it bother you very much to make all the arrangements for me? Then later on in the fall, when I have sold Elijah, I will send you the money and you can return the books.”

¶ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ¶

“I’ll see to it,” he cried; “it’s the very thing!”

“Of course,” I ventured, “if he should have a better offer in the meantime —”

“Not likely,” he laughed. “After the poor cane crop last year there’s not much ready money lying round.”

“And not everybody has an Elijah,” I cried gaily.

Then Fred returned to say that dinner was ready, and the subject was dropped; but the Colonel did not forget it and told me the next time he called that Dabney had said I might have the books for twenty dollars, owing to their incomplete condition.

“Isn’t that very cheap?” I remarked doubtfully.

“Of course it is; but they are slightly damaged, and Dabney wouldn’t take advantage of you; he’s a good fellow in spite of his faults. People say he ruined me, and perhaps he did, but we all make mistakes, and he’s

◀ BAYOU TRISTE ▶

as sorry as any one can be for my misfortunes. It would do you good to hear him talk, Mary, it really would."

But sad to relate, in spite of the Colonel's enthusiasm, my heart did not warm towards the mistaken but repentent Mr. Dabney, Fred's contemptuous expressions concerning him having more weight with me than all the Colonel's eulogies. Which proves that I was quite human in my proneness to believe the worst rather than the best of people.

The summer drifted by, a glorious, fragrant summer, filled to the brim with pleasant happenings.

Elijah, as I had predicted, waxed vigorous and corpulent. I regret to say, however, that he was not popular with the kitchen authorities, for Uncle Ephr'um looked with an envious eye upon the buckets of buttermilk carried to his pen daily; while Priscilla's in-

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

dignation over the wasteful amount of sweet potatoes consumed by him found vent in low murmurs that I thought it expedient to ignore.

Charlie mocked and Fred laughed at what they were pleased to call my "business venture," but I kept my own counsel and asked no sympathy from either of them.

One day, towards the end of October, the Colonel arrived to say that he was much grieved to tell me that his friend Dabney had been sent for suddenly and needed some ready money at once. He would be obliged to sell the Audubons to some one, but of course desired to give me the preference.

I was plunged into despair.

"Could he wait until to-morrow?" I asked.

"Certainly," said the Colonel. "Mary, my dear child, I wish I had the money to advance for you!"

"I know you do," I answered, "but wait until to-morrow, and I will send

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

it by Uncle Ephr'um and he can bring me back the books."

The Colonel having taken his departure, I went in search of Fred, desiring him to arrange with the butcher all the preliminaries for the sacrifice of Elijah.

Priscilla told me, with what I imagined a grin of triumph, that Fred had gone to "Vieuxtemps" and would not be back until night.

"Sumpin de matter wid de mill," she explained.

My heart sank ; any trouble with the machinery during the sugar-making season meant complete absorption of Fred ; I could look for no help from that quarter.

Charlie I refused to consider.

Priscilla told me she was "plum crazy wid de mizry in de back, an' had a sassiety meetin' besides."

Uncle Ephr'um, while not actually refusing to go for the butcher, made so many objections to doing so that I

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

flung away in a temper. "I know what it is," I cried scornfully; "you don't want me to sell Elijah. You'd like to eat him yourselves, you and Priscilla. Oh, you think I don't see through you, but I do! And mark my words," darkly, "if I do have to keep him, neither you nor Priscilla nor Joe shall ever taste a bite of him."

"What I bin doin', Miss Mary?" asked Joe's hurt voice at my elbow.

"Find the butcher for me," I said, "and you won't be sorry, Joe," and I moved hurriedly out of Uncle Ephr'um's demoralizing neighborhood.

My eloquence, not to say my bribery, resulted in the appearance of the butcher an' hour or so later.

He was not at all what I had anticipated, and I was greatly disconcerted by his prosperous appearance. I felt that it would be quite impossible to argue over the price of a pig with such a well-dressed individual.

However, it was too late now to re-

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

treat, so accompanied by Uncle Ephr'um (murmuring under his breath "dat hit warnt fitten bizness fur a lady nohow") I escorted Elijah's future owner to the pen.

My conscience reproached me when two greedy little eyes twinkled up at me, for I came no longer as a generous provider with an eye to future benefit, but as a ruthless executioner thirsting for his life's blood.

To my dismay, Theophile Dumon did not seem impressed by Elijah's corpulency. He spoke lightly of it and poked him in the sides with a depreciatory finger.

He was polite but amused when I mentioned fifteen dollars as the price I expected to receive, and he mentioned incidentally that Mr. Harrell on the place below had much finer pigs than Elijah, and made a motion as if to remount his big black horse.

My spirits fell, for the Audubon

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books seemed to be slipping away from me.

Then Dumon spoke, as one who makes a great concession and is conscious of his generosity.

“I tell you what I’ll do,” he said. “Mr. Fred, he’s a good fren’ of mine; I’ll give you ten dollars down for the hog. I don’ reckon I’ll make anything on him, but no matter.”

I longed to tell him that I had never heard of him as a philanthropist, but dignity forbade this pleasure, so mastering my indignation and with as great an air of condescension as I could assume I signified my willingness to accept the offer.

Then I marched away, leaving the rebellious Uncle Ephr’um to conclude the ceremonies incidental to Elijah’s departure, and to receive his blood money.

Dumon lost no time in carrying off his prize, and when Fred returned (several hours sooner than he was ex-

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

pected) I gave him a graphic account of the whole transaction. When I mentioned Elijah's price he opened his eyes.

"Why, he cheated you out of sight, Mary," he said. "Elijah's worth fifteen dollars if he's worth ten cents!"

"Oh, I know that," I said meekly, "but I don't know a thing about bargaining. Uncle Ephr'um said 'hit warnt fitten bizness fur a lady,' and I think he was about right."

"Why didn't you wait until I got back?"

"I had to have the money at once."

"Why?"

"That's a secret."

"Well, I sincerely hope your next venture will turn out better than this one."

His words sent a cold shiver of apprehension through me; but the next morning when Uncle Ephr'um set off in the little spring cart, with the ten dollars (added to ten I had already)

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

pinned securely in his vest pocket, my spirits again rose.

He returned late that night, in a pouring rain and a very bad temper. When in response to a summons I went out into the back hall I found him standing by a rusty box with the water dripping from his clothes.

“Go into the kitchen and get dry at once,” I cried at sight of him. “You’ll take your death of cold.”

“I reckon I done done dat,” was the grim reply. “May I never see sich roads ez you sont me fru dis day, Miss Mary. Ise tankful ter git back alive; an’ ez fur ole Suley, she sho is bad off.”

“Tell Joe to rub her down,” I said, refusing to be depressed by these calamities, for I knew Uncle Ephr’um of old.

“De Kunnel he sont you dis,” he went on, taking a letter from the lining of his hat. “De oder gemman he lef on de boat jes arfter I ’rived.”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

I opened the Colonel's note and read by the hall light :

MY DEAR MARY :

It has occurred to me that my friend Dabney (in his careless way) may have exaggerated the value of his Audubon books ; in other words, may have thought them in better condition than they are. They have been packed for some time and may have met with some mishap.

I suggested to him that we open the box and examine them prior to sending them to you, but he seemed to imagine that I doubted his good faith and grew so nervous over the subject that I did not pursue it.

But I desire to say that should the books prove on examination to be greatly defaced or otherwise injured that I hold myself responsible for your loss and will see that your money is refunded.

My friend Dabney is in great trouble at present, a near relative being at death's door, and he has just left to go to him, but I feel sure he would ratify what I say if he were here.

Remember to let me know the condition of your purchase.

❧ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ❧

With expressions of high regard for yourself and your brother, believe me

Your obedient servant and friend,

BEVERLY LOSSING.

OCTOBER 28, 1898.

I looked up.

Fred was standing by me staring from the dripping Uncle Ephr'um to the box at my feet. "What's all this?" he asked.

"Open it," I said faintly (for Joe had brought in the hatchet).

Fred knelt down and began to pry off the box top. A cloud of dust flew into our faces as we bent over it together.

"It's a present for you!" I explained haltingly. "Audubon books! You said you wanted them. Colonel Lossing's friend, Mr. Dabney, sold them to me."

Fred paused in his work.

"Then they're no good," he said.

"O, Fred!" I cried; then a moment later, after mastering my tears, I said:

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

"The Colonel seemed to fear that too," and I gave my brother the note.

"Do you read between the lines?" he asked.

"No."

"He tried to prevent the sale and that cheat Dabney would n't let go."

"But why did he ever let him have the money?"

Uncle Ephr'um here put in a word.

"De oder gemman met me at de gate," he said. "He say de Kunnel wuz seeck in bade an' I wuz ter let him have de money, kase he's bleegeed to leave straight off on de leetle boat."

"And you gave it to him?"

Uncle Ephr'um scratched his head.

"He talked reel convincin'-like, Mass' Fred, an' he say he ma's dyin'."

Fred laughed in spite of his disgust.

"His poor old mother's been dead these thirty years," he said. "Now clear out, both of you."

Having dismissed the two curious onlookers, Fred proceeded to open the

¶ THE SACRIFICE OF ELIJAH ¶

box, while I sat in a dejected heap on the floor beside him. When the cover was finally removed (for the nails were driven deep) our worst fears were realized.

I could not well have been more deceived. Audubon books they undoubtedly had been, but in what prehistoric age it would have been difficult to say. The covers were in fairly good condition, but when we opened them heaps of dust and tiny scraps of paper were all we found inside.

Here and there the bill of a bird, the webbed foot of a duck, the outline of a tiny wing, indicated that Audubon's marvels had fallen victims to that terror to all Louisiana libraries — the silver moth.

When the last book had been lifted out and we could neither hope nor suffer more, I am not ashamed to confess that I broke down and sobbed unrestrainedly.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

Fred drew his arm about my shaking shoulders.

“Don’t take it so hard,” he said. “I’m just as much obliged to you, and who could have anticipated this?”

“I don’t see how he could do it,” I moaned. “He must have known, and I had looked forward so to your delight.”

“He ought to be horse-whipped!” he cried.

“The poor old Colonel,” I said, “it will grieve him awfully to learn this. Yet how am I to keep it from him? And Charlie,” piling on the agony, “he’ll never stop laughing.”

“He won’t laugh at all; he’ll be as angry as I am.”

I looked at the empty box, the heap of dingy covers, the piles of dust and scattered bits of paper; and the iron entered into my soul.

“And it was for this,” I said bitterly, “for this” — with a tragic wave of the hand — “that I sacrificed Elijah!”

XIII

SIX MONTHS OF MARRIAGE

THE hen-house door was wide open, and Priscilla and Joe had for the last half-hour been fruitlessly endeavoring to persuade the old gray turkey-hen to enter it.

Her mincing step and reflective manner, as she would hesitate at the door and then pass by, were irresistibly amusing to an onlooker, and correspondingly aggravating to her would-be captors.

From the safe vantage ground of the back steps I watched proceedings, occasionally throwing in words of advice to further irritate the situation.

“Head her off, Joe!” I called excitedly. “Priscilla, you come round on the other side. Good gracious! how on earth could you let her pass?”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

Priscilla turned and looked at me.

“Miss Mary,” she said with infinite feeling, “s’posen you tries to tote her in yourself. Ise dead beat by now, an’ I lows ef you knows how ter ketch her, you ought ter come an’ take a han’.”

The gage was thrown down and I was racking my brains how to escape with honor, when Charlotte Wilson, who was Charlotte Deals, came around the corner of the house.

Her appearance was a signal of deliverance.

“Priscilla,” said I, rising and motioning Charlotte to follow, “I know Charlotte has only a few minutes to spare, so I’ll have to leave you and Joe to fight it out with old Aunt Sukey,” for such was the turkey-hen’s name, due to her ludicrous resemblance to one of our old servants.

Charlotte grinned. She had heard Priscilla’s challenge and appreciated the humor of the situation.

¶ SIX MONTHS OF MARRIAGE ¶

“I kin drop in anoder time, Miss Mary,” she said in a low tone.

“Come into the garden,” I replied, ignoring the suggestion, “I’m tired of the steps anyhow.”

It was a perfect October day. The sky was a deep blue, the grass fresh and green, and the branches vivid, despite the approach of winter.

As I flung myself on my favorite bench, the delicious fragrance of violets and sweet olive was overpowering.

Even Charlotte, who was not poetically inclined, felt the charm, for she remarked as she seated herself (at my request) on a fallen log, “Yo’ roses sho do fumigate de gardeen, Miss Mary.”

“Yes,” said I dreamily, “and now, Charlotte, tell me how you like being married?”

Charlotte twisted her bonnet string round her finger.

“Wese bin married six months, Miss Mary,” she said, “an’ he ain’ never beat me yit.”

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

An indignant "I should think not" was on my lips, but a swift recollection of circumstances checked me.

What volumes did not that pathetic speech reveal! How meagre must her ideas of married happiness be, that she could find contentment in so little! I thought of her father, old Peter Deals, sullen, morose, and irritable, and realized that from him she doubtless drew her estimate of conjugal conduct.

"Then he is good to you?" I said tentatively.

"Yessum; he ain' sose ter say very free wid his money, but I teks in a leetle washin' every week, an' so we gits erlong."

"I saw your house," I said, "Mr. Fred and I passed it last week." For Lincoln, scorning a plantation cabin, had rented a tiny cottage on the outskirts of the village.

"Did you, Miss Mary? Hit's reel smart-lookin', ain' hit?"

I did not smile, but "smart-lookin'"

¶ SIX MONTHS OF MARRIAGE ¶

was certainly exaggerated praise of the little low-roomed building Fred had pointed out to me as Charlotte's dwelling.

"The vine on your gallery is lovely," I said. "You must give me a root of it."

"Lor', Miss Mary, do you really want hit? Why, I'll fotch you over some to-morrow."

"What furniture have you?" I went on, for I saw she was pining to be "led out."

"Not so much, Miss Mary. My pa guv me a bed an' a bureau fur a weddin' presen', but I lef 'em at he house."

"Left them?" I repeated. "What a curious idea."

Charlotte shook her head.

"No'm; dey's mine, you see, en' ef Lincoln an' me ever falls out, I'll hev 'em all right at my pa's; but ef I fotches 'em over ter us house Lincoln cud say dey wuz his'n an' tek 'em fur heself."

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

The confident anticipation of trouble and subsequent deep laid schemes in regard to the bed and bureau made me open my eyes.

“But, Charlotte,” I protested, “you oughtn’t to feel like that; when people are married they must trust each other.”

Charlotte smiled.

“Dat’s white folks’ ways, Miss Mary, but niggers is diffrent. You kawnt count on a nigger; youse bleeged ter be rady fur him. I knows Ise slow an’ ugly, an’ Lincoln’s one of dese hyar high-steppin’ niggers what ain’ get no better sense den ter think deys ez good ez ennybody, so he might git tired of me. Den he’d ’gin ter treat me bad sose ter mek me quit him.”

“I hope that will never happen,” I said.

“Well, Miss Mary, I don’ reckon hit will,” she responded cheerfully. “I cooks an’ I washes an’ I darns fur him; I keeps him cumfurtubble, an’ I ain’

¶ SIX MONTHS OF MARRIAGE ¶

never sputing what he's got ter say (kase I kin hev my own idees jes de same), an' I lows we'll git erlong ez well ez mos' folks."

"Are you sorry you married?" I asked gently.

"Sorry? Why no, ma'am. You knows how hit is, Miss Mary; marryin' is jes like everything else. You kawnt tell how hit's gwine ter tun out. Youse bleeged ter tek yo' chances. An' talkin' 'bout dat, I heerd tell you wuz gwine ter be married fo' long."

Somehow or other I did not think the moment a happy one to discuss my own matrimonial arrangements.

"You can't believe all you hear, Charlotte," I replied vaguely.

"No'm, but ef hit's true, an' I reckon hit is, I hopes he's got plenty of money an' you'll be happy ever arfter."

"I hope so," I replied with sudden gloom.

Charlotte arose.

"Well, Ise got ter be gwine, Miss

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

Mary. Don' furgit me ef you happens ter fine enny ole dress or hat what won't do you no mo' good."

"I won't," said I. "By the way, there's a pan of milk in the dairy you can take home with you ; ask Priscilla for it as you go by."

So Charlotte went away and left me to my reflections, — reflections not altogether as cheerful as they might have been.

A short while later, when Joe came into the garden with the water can, he handed me a letter.

"Mass' Fred guv hit ter me ; he say hit cum by de late mail."

At sight of the well-known handwriting my spirits rose.

As I broke the seal I happened to look across the yard and saw Lincoln's wife, a little, thin, weather-beaten figure, plodding slowly homewards.

"Poor little Charlotte," I said compassionately.

XIV

GOOD-BYE

IT was the tenth of November, a glorious afternoon with a clear brightness to the sun, a crispness to the atmosphere that set the blood tingling in the veins. I paused on my way to the garden to sit upon the steps in happy, untroubled idleness.

To-morrow was my wedding day!

A little while and the old life would be gone like a dream. I looked out at the shadow-haunted yard with a sudden realization of loss. The sight of Joe and Priscilla's Benjie quarrelling beneath the pecan trees, and of Priscilla crossing the grass with her skirts caught high about her hips, sights quite unemotional in themselves, brought the tears to my eyes and something like a sob to my throat.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

Yesterday afternoon, when Kate and Agnes were sleeping, I had stolen down to our family graveyard to say a good-bye prayer at my mother's grave, and to-day, with the strange new feeling of responsibility and loneliness upon me, I missed her as I had never missed her before.

Kate came laughing down the gallery.

"Something old, and something new,
Something borrowed, and something blue,"
she quoted. "Oh, child! I would n't be in your shoes for gold."

"Fine words," I answered, "with your own wedding only half a month away."

"There's yet time," teased Mrs. Ewing, slipping to a seat beside me. "Why don't you back out before it's too late?"

"I don't want to back out," I declared.

"Well, after all, I don't blame you; he's really very pleasant, and with the

❧ GOOD-BYE ❧

kindest gray eyes. But I think you might have married a home man."

" 'Nobody asked me, sir, she said.' "

"Don't notice her, Agnes ; she wants you to deny it," cried Kate.

"Poor Mr. Donald !" was Agnes' reply.

"Miss Mary," said Priscilla's unctious voice, "leetle yaller Susan and Jeems Vincent's Sophy'd like ter see you."

"Very well !" said I. "Good gracious ! if there's one thing on earth I dread, it's visits from old servants. The very sight of them drives every idea I have out of my mind ; and when I've asked after their children, and grandchildren, and cross-questioned them about their chickens and gardens, I've reached the end of my tether. Fortunately somebody dies now and then and gives us something to talk about."

"O Mary, how can you ?" cried Agnes.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“Try it for yourself,” I retorted; “see how your better nature shrivels up. Come, Kate, help me out like a good girl.”

“Not I,” said Kate.

“Well, you, Agnes?”

“They don’t want to see me,” she protested. “You’re the attraction; you — and your marriage — these are wedding visits and you must accept them in proper form.”

“There’s one comfort,” I said, as I was gloomily departing, “Kate will have all this to do after I’m gone.”

“Don’t remind me,” she called, “or I might break off my engagement.”

Yellow Susan was a small, bright-eyed little woman who had been my mother’s maid, and her proprietary interest in me and my affairs was of long standing. Between her and Mammy existed a deadly feud, the latter considering her affection for me highly impertinent, and an infringement of her own rights.

❧ GOOD-BYE ❧

Susan questioned me closely about Hugh and his family, and, above all, his prospects, and was much chagrined when I betrayed the most lamentable ignorance of his finances.

“Do hush, Miss Mary!” she cried, “you sholy ain’ marryin’ poor! I heered tell he was rich, an’ I wuz that proud.”

“Money is n’t everything,” I responded.

Aunt Sophy here put in a word :

“No ’m, hit ain’ everything, dat ’s so ; but hit ain’ nothing ter laff at neider.”

“How’s Nathan?” I asked, with a view of diverting the conversation.

“He’s right smart, thank you, Miss Mary. He’s got a place on de railroad as car porter.”

If she had said as President of the United States, her pride could not have been greater ; and after congratulating her warmly, I proceeded with my category.

“What’s big Jacob doing now?”

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

"Ain' doin' nothin' ceppen drink heself ter death," was the mournful reply.

"Oh, Aunt Sophy, I'm very sorry," I said.

"No mo'n I is, Honey, seein' ez I hez his nocount wife an' chillun on my han's."

Having no comfort to offer under such unfortunate circumstances, I adroitly changed the subject.

"And what have you been doing with yourself, Aunt Susan?"

Her companion chuckled. "What you reckon she's done done?"

"I can't imagine."

"Bin an' gone an' got married agin!"

"And you never sent me word!" I exclaimed.

"I wuz ashamed, Honey. I wuz feered you'd laff at me. I knowed you an' Mass' Fred'd think I wuz too ole an' settled-like fur sech gwineson, so I lowed I'd lay low ontwell I'd git kiner used ter hit."

❧ GOOD-BYE ❧

“Whom did you marry?” I asked, wondering whether the bridegroom had been entirely disinterested, or influenced somewhat by her savings and her comfortable cabin in the village.

“Ole Peter Brown.”

Now Peter was the best fiddler in the parish, and a great favorite with all of us, so I smiled my approval.

“You’ll never want for music, will you?” I laughed.

“Now, Honey,” said Susan reproachfully, “you disremembers dat sence Ise got religion, I don’ hev nothin’ ter do wid sech sinful percedins. Why, me an’ Peter bunned his fiddle spang up in de kitchen hyarth ’fore I’d ’gree to marry him.”

“Burned his violin! Oh, how could you?”

“Hit wuz Satan’s tool, chile, de call of de ungodly ter pore weak sinners.”

“Well, I’m afraid I’m one of them,” I said, “for I dearly loved his music. Now I know you have something else

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

to do, so I won't keep you." (This was my favorite formula when my guests showed no symptoms of departure.) "But come into the pantry first and drink my health in black-berry cordial."

"Here 's to you an' todes you,
Ef I 'd never seed you I 'd never knowed you!"

said Susan, wiping out her glass with her apron.

"Red fur de blackbird, blue fur de wren,
Jye ter de pretty gals an' nothin' fur de men,"

chanted Aunt Sophy, not to be out-done. "Tell Mass' Fred howdy fur us, Miss Mary, an' don' furgit ter save us some of de good things termorrer."

"Oh, you must come to my wedding," I cried, "I shall expect you. Well, that 's over," darting into Kate's room and flinging myself on the bed. "They 're so good-hearted, and so affectionate, and so — unspeakably dull."

❧ GOOD-BYE ❧

Kate was making an evergreen garland, a thing of beauty that grew like magic under her deft fingers.

“This is to go in the hall,” she said, ignoring me and my woes, “and Agnes has made a lovely one for the folding-doors. Joe and Uncle Ephr’um are hard at work on the mantel-pieces, and Mammy’s generally ordering things round. I thought you’d like to know how we were progressing.”

“I want to be married in the front drawing-room on the very spot where my mother stood before me,” I said.

“Very well, come and show me the place.”

The windows were wide open, November though it was, and through the filmy curtains the late sun poured like a golden flood, making one forget the faded furniture and worn carpets. Mammy was dusting the portraits with reverent hands, and Priscilla, on her knees before the hearth, was dispensing

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

wisdom to Joe and Uncle Ephr'um, who received it scornfully.

Agnes, having hung her garland, was studying the effect from a distant chair. I went over to her with shining eyes.

“What should I have done without you two,” I asked, “and how can I ever repay you?”

“By looking your prettiest to-morrow and making Mr. Delancey think well of all Southern women.”

“Keep that uplifted look you have now,” said Kate, “that expression of etherealized happiness! We don't see it very often nowadays.”

“Miss Mary,” warned Mammy from the window, “I see Mis' Brune's carriage at de gate.”

“Oh, come!” I cried wildly. “Agnes! Kate! — both of you. Mammy,” over my shoulder, “say we've gone to the sugar-house — the fields — anywhere. Tell them how sorry we are —”

❧ GOOD-BYE ❧

I was already half-way down the back steps, having snatched a sunbonnet as I tore through the hall.

“Lovely conduct for a bride-to-be,” gasped Kate at my side.

“You don’t know the Brunes,” I answered. “Oh, there’s the very thing,” catching sight of old Suley in Uncle Ephr’um’s little bob-tailed cart. “Jump in, Agnes; sit down, Kate. Get up, Suley, get up!” — and away we rattled, down the big road, across the fields to the “Quarters.”

When danger lay far behind us I allowed Suley to fall into a walk, and turned around with a triumphant smile.

“Presence of mind is an excellent thing,” I observed conceitedly.

“It would serve you right if Mr. Delancey came while you were gone,” said Agnes.

“He’s not coming till ‘tea,’ I said. “I told him not to come; that we had to get the house ready.”

“This looks like it,” sarcastically.

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

“All is fair in love and the Bruness,” I quoted. “How delicious!” as the wind brought us the odor of fried bacon from the “Quarters’” kitchens. “I’ve half a mind to stop and get supper at Modeste’s.”

“She is quite mad,” observed Agnes. “Better humor her, Kate.”

The “Quarters” wore its accustomed look of languid activity; negro children played at the road’s edge, dogs darted wildly about, getting in everybody’s way; here a goat tied with a long string browsed on the ditch bank; there a big-eyed calf stared at us through the fence rails. From every chimney floated a wavering line of gray smoke; supper was in course of preparation.

As we neared the sugar-house, the centre of interest just now, a tardy recollection of the overseers and of Fred decided me to abandon the cart; but before I could do so he appeared round the corner of the blacksmith’s

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shop, accompanied, to my great dismay, by Hugh.

Agnes and Kate greeted them cordially, but I scrambled from my perch with scarcely a word of welcome, for when one has posed as exceedingly dignified it is awkward to be found out.

“Why did you get down?” asked Hugh, as we were strolling to the cane shed. “You looked awfully jolly up there.”

“Jolly!” I repeated disgustedly. “By the way, I thought you were safe in Vieuxtemps. How came you to be out here?”

“Why, Fred asked me to come over, and as I’d never seen ‘grinding,’ I was glad to accept. It’s very interesting all through.”

“I suppose it is,” I answered, “but I never understand the machinery, and it does worry Fred so.”

We had reached the great shed, with its heaps of cane and laugh-

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

ing, good-natured workers. Some of them were children, but they threw their cane on the carrier with as much vim and energy as their elders.

The foreman of the gang, and an old acquaintance of mine, caught sight of us and came hurrying over to speak to me.

“Wese mity sorry ter lose you, Miss Mary,” he said, “but hit’s a jye ter know youse gwine ter be taken good keer of.”

I looked at Hugh, and as his eyes met mine, the steady gray eyes I loved, it needed no verbal assurance to know that old Roger’s confidence was warranted.

“Give us a song, boys,” called Fred. “Something bright and lively sounding, like a hornpipe. Lead them off, Roger.”

And the next moment the rafters echoed to the rhythmical nonsense of

“Hop light, ladies, de cake’s all do’,
Never mine de wedder ef de win’ don’ blow!”

❧ GOOD-BYE ❧

“Mary,” said Hugh, as we were strolling slowly homewards, “this is such a pleasant, care-free existence that I’m afraid some day you may regret it. My heart sinks at the thought and I wonder at my own selfishness !”

“Care-free ?” I echoed indignantly ; “with crevasses and tariffs and bounties. Who ever heard of such a thing ?”

“But you love it so,” he insisted jealously ; “it amounts to a passion with you.”

“Yes, I do love it, everything about it ; and with all its anxieties there’s no life like it in the world,” and my glance wandered wistfully around. “Dear, lovely, unprofitable old place, I think I was born loving it, and I have been so happy here.”

“And to-morrow you say good-bye to it forever.”

“Forever !” I echoed dreamily. Then, struck by his silence, I turned

❧ BAYOU TRISTE ❧

to look at him curiously. "You don't mind my liking it? You wouldn't have it otherwise, would you?"

"No, no, it's very natural; but tell me you are willing to come, — that you will be content. You are everything in the world to me, and it would make me wretched if you were not happy."

I smiled into his anxious face.

"There are compensations," I said. "Oh, you foolish Hugh," as he still looked unconvinced, "have I not told you that I love you?"

About an hour later, when I was dressing for tea, Priscilla knocked at my door, ostensibly to bring me a light, but in reality to free her mind of a few valedictory thoughts.

"Miss Mary, chile," she said, coming over to where I sat by the low fire, "I sho is sorry ter lose you. Me an' you hez got on fus-rate tergedder."

"I'm sorry to go, Priscilla," I re-

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sponded. "Sorry and glad at the same time."

"Yessum, I knows you is; sorry kase hit's tunning yo' back on de ole place, an' glad kase hit's Mass' Hugh what's tekin' you off. Hit's nateral, chile, but Ise downright mad youse gwine so far away."

"I shall come back," I said. "Mr. Hugh has promised to bring me."

"'T ain' de same, Miss Mary, 't ain' de same; youse done wid all of us, allus! Howsomever, dat ain' what I hed on my mine ter tell you."

"What was it?" I queried, thinking she wanted to ask some final questions about to-morrow's arrangements.

"Hit's dis, Miss Mary. Me an' Hinery an' Ephr'um wuz talkin' 'bout you larst night — you an' Mass' Hugh; an' Hinery he up an' say, sez he, 'Miss Mary's gwine up yander wid all dose rich folkses, an' bimeby wese gwine ter pass clean out 'n her mine.'"

¶ BAYOU TRISTE ¶

“And did Uncle Ephr’um agree with Henry?”

“Ephr’um, he say, ‘Go long, nigger; she ain’ dat kine, you don’ know Miss Mary. All de riches on dis green yuth ain’ gwine ter mek her furgit ole Louisianny!”

“And how about you?”

“S’ I, ‘Ephr’um Gabul, an’ you, Hinery Wilson, lissen ter me. Dem rich folkses ain’ never gwine onsettle Miss Mary, kase she’s got what’s better’n money — she’s got blood, an’ she ain’ never gwine back on hit.”

“Thank you,” said I, trying valiantly to forget certain acts of hers not consistent with these noble ideas. “I hope I’ll never disappoint you.”

“Dat’s right, Miss Mary,” she cried, “dat’s right. Don’ you let ’em skeer you; nemmine ef dey is rich, jes you hole up your hade an’ ’member who you is, an’ nothin’ ain’ gwine ter flustrate you den.”

A sentiment so entirely in sympathy

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with my own views, that in the after years I found it easy to comply with the parting advice of my voluble, audacious, yet always good-hearted follower.

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